THE HIDDEN IMAM

HENRI CORBIN

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BOOKS

The Hidden Imam

Henry Corbin

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I

Twelver Shi'ite Prophetology[1]

1. The *True Prophet* and Shi'ite Prophetic Theology

Let us discuss a subject that ought to be present in the mind of every theologian and every philosopher when considering the study of Christianity in the West. The history of Shi'ite prophetology is, in fact, intertwined with our own theological and philosophical history, although, regrettably, the vicissitudes of time have meant that the subject has been almost entirely neglected.

To shed light on the path we are about to tread together over the next few minutes, I shall recall what theologians and historians of Christianity have already stated and confirmed on numerous occasions, namely that the defining doctrine of early Christianity, that is, of Judeo-Christianity, that of the Jerusalem community, the Church of St James, was the prophetology that culminated in the motif of the *Verus* Propheta, the 'True Prophet', who, from prophet to prophet, hastens towards his place of rest. It is not that early Christianity which has survived in the official Christianity of history. Its fate was sealed by the triumph of Paulinism, which Judeo-Christianity regarded as the great adversary that distorted the teaching of Christ, whose witnesses, however, were still to be found within the ranks of the early Jerusalem community. As is well known, the principal monument that remains to us of this is the so-called Clementine literature. I believe that from now on it will be necessary to add to this the long and strange text of the Gospel of Barnabas, with its expressly anti-Pauline prologue, which received a magnificent reception in Islam. This reception echoes the observation of our historians of Christianity, in the sense that the prophetology which the latter had rejected was ultimately inherited and fully embraced by Islam.

We must therefore take this observation as our starting point, for although it is true, it would nevertheless be only partially true if we did not relate it to the prophetology that is precisely the subject of our talk: Shi'ite prophetology. To begin with, I must point out that Shi'ism comprises two major branches: on the one hand, Twelver Shi'ism (or the Shi'ism of the Twelve Imams), which has been the official religion of Persia for almost five centuries. On the other, Ismaili Shi'ism, whose theology is structured not around the number twelve, but around the number seven. Today we are going to discuss the prophecy of Twelver Shiism. However, in any case, taking both forms of Shiism together, and bearing in mind the prophetology they respectively entail, the question we must first ask ourselves is: what distinguishes Shiite prophetology from Sunni prophetology, that is, from that of mainstream Islam? And why is this difference

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[1] Lecture delivered at the University of Geneva in 1975. For a more detailed treatment of the subject of this lecture, see H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien ...,* Gallimard, Paris, 1971, vol. I, the entire volume, but especially pp. 219–329. (*Translator's note)*

precisely what enables us to view Shi'a Islam as the heir, so to speak, to the Christology of Judeo-Christianity?

Put very briefly, what distinguishes Shi'ite prophetology is that it is, as such, complemented by an aspect that is both complementary and essential: imamology. This latter term is derived from the word *imâm*, which designates the guide, the one who goes before and, therefore, the one who awakens, directs and enlightens consciences. (The term Shi'ism, derived from the Arabic *shî'a*, designates the body of followers who follow the Imam). The person and role of the Imam not only arise from the fundamental idea of Shi'ism, but are also the bearers of this fundamental idea. And this fundamental idea is inseparable from what I have elsewhere termed the 'phenomenon of the Holy Book', the Book revealed from Heaven through a prophet, a phenomenon common to all three branches of the Abrahamic tradition. The prophet's mission concerns the descent (*tanzîl)* of the Book with its literal content. The mission of the Imam is to redirect that literal appearance towards its spiritual truth, a redirection expressed by the word *ta'wîl*, which designates what we call spiritual hermeneutics or the hermeneutics of symbols. The idea of this mission of the Imam is, of course, utterly foreign, even scandalous, to Sunni Islam.

From what essentially constitutes the person and mission of the Prophet, as well as what constitutes the person and mission of the Imam, arises the idea of a dual cycle within the prophetic religion that encompasses the entirety of the Abrahamic religion. Prophet and Imam are the two forms of manifestation of the same Light, of the same Logos, designated by the expressions 'Muhammadian Light' (*Nûr mohammadî)* and 'Eternal Prophetic Reality' (*Haqîqat mohammadîya)*. The cycle of prophecy is followed by the cycle of the Imamate or spiritual initiation, the cycle of the 'Friends of God'. Here we can glimpse in what sense Shi'ite prophetology is the repository of the theology of *the Verus Propheta*. We shall recall that for Judeo-Christianity the question is whether or not Jesus was the prophet foretold by Moses (Deut 19:15 ff.). It was by no means his death that had redemptive significance, but his expected return, his triumphant parousia. He was the Redeemer insofar as he was an enlightener and awakener of consciences, and in that sense he remained essentially the object of eschatological expectation and hope. Not everything had yet been accomplished. The Christianity of the Jerusalem community remained essentially eschatological, without surrendering to the perils of history. It is these two fundamental features that we shall find in Shi'ite imamology.

Now, according to the prophetology of Sunni Islam, Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets. The religious history of humanity is complete. There will be neither a new Book nor a new prophet. The last prophet is thus an event of the past; he has succumbed to history. For Shi'ite prophetology, the cycle of prophecy has certainly ended, but that was the cycle of what is termed 'legislative prophecy'. What follows is something different: a prophecy of a purely internal, esoteric nature, which, to avoid any ambiguity, is designated by another name, that of *walâyat*, a term to which we shall return later. Sunni prophetology

remains fixed on the past. Shi'ite prophetology remains open to the future due to its essentially eschatological perspective. There is also, undoubtedly, a Sunni eschatology, expressed in the expectation of the Mahdi, but this does not form an organic whole with prophetic theology, whereas in Shi'ism, precisely because of imamology—the doctrine of the Imam—and the person of the awaited Imam, the Twelfth Imam, eschatology forms an organic whole with imamology, which is an essential, fundamental part of Shi'ite theology and thought.

Just as the manifestation of *the Verus Propheta* had not come to an end with the disappearance of Jesus, but rather thought and devotion remained oriented towards his future manifestation, so too are the thought and devotion of Twelver Shi'ism centred on the coming parousia of the Twelfth Imam. And when we see the most profound Shi'ite thinkers identifying the person of the Twelfth Imam with the Paraclete announced in the Gospel of John, we realise that there is also an organic link between the eschatology of the three branches of the Abrahamic tradition and that we must finally learn to view things as a whole.

Here, I believe, our path is illuminated to some extent. Let us distinguish its stages. I would therefore like to clarify these three points:

1. The fundamental idea of Shi'ite prophetology, which allows us to see how the person and necessity of the Imam emerge from the phenomenon of the Holy Book.

2. The idea of a dual cycle of prophetic religion, which arises from the relationship between prophetology and imamology, which are inseparable from one another.

3. A recapitulation within the paracletic framework of Shi'ite prophetology and imamology, and the transition from this perspective to the subject of the second talk: Ismaili prophetology.

2. The fundamental idea of Shi'ite prophetology

In this brief talk, it is impossible for me to offer a historical overview of Shi'ism, all the more so because, unlike Sunni heresiographers, I believe that Imamite Shi'ism arose during the Prophet's lifetime. This is attested to by the *companionship* of the man who was both his cousin and his closest relative, 'Alī ibn Abī-Tālib, the First Imam.

He later asserted vehemently that not a single verse of the Qur'an had been revealed without the Prophet first having him write it down with his own hand, then recite it, and subsequently teaching him the *tafsîr* (the literal explanation) and the *ta'wîl* (the exegesis of the spiritual meaning). Imamite Shi'ism holds that the legacy of this sacred *companionship* was rejected from the very last breath of the Prophet, and that mainstream Sunni Islam has since embarked on the path that has made it what it has historically become.

To understand the fundamental idea of Imamite Shi'ism, it is best to start with what those whom the Qur'an designates as the *Ahl al-Kitâb*—that is, the communities of the Book—have in common, namely the three major branches of the Abrahamic community. What these three

What these communities have in common is the possession of a Holy Book revealed to a prophet and taught to them by that prophet. The fundamental issue remains that of understanding and helping others to understand (this is what the word ‘hermeneutics’ refers to) the true meaning of that Book. For Imamism, as with any other form of gnosis, that true meaning is the spiritual meaning. Understanding it requires a certain way of being. From the outset, the phenomenon of the Holy Book poses a demand that calls into question the very nature of man, and the three communities of the Book have successively faced the same difficulty to overcome.

This difficulty lies in the fact that the deeds of the characters recounted in the Holy Book must have a different meaning from the one they would have if they simply appeared in a secular book. The Fifth Imam of the Shiites, Mohammad Bâqir (115/733), put the situation in terms that all seekers of the spiritual meaning of the Bible might have accepted. “If the revelation of the Qur’an,” he said, “had meaning only for the man or group of men to whom certain verses were revealed, the entire Holy Book would have been dead long ago.
But no! The Holy Book never dies. The meaning of its verses will be fulfilled in the people of the future just as it was fulfilled in those of the past. And so it will be until the Last Day.” The Imam thus pre-emptively dismantled the traps of historicism to which so many in the West have succumbed.

Now, that meaning which ceaselessly fulfils itself from age to age, which defines a transhistorical plane of permanence, is the hidden, inner, esoteric meaning, in the etymological sense of the term. The *intelligentia spiritualis*, which posits the perception of this permanent and ever-new spiritual meaning, determines in man a form of temporality of his own that is no longer the empirical, chronological temporality which situates and fixes the event in the past. The event is always imminent. Some of our Shi’ite thinkers have spoken of a subtle time (*latif)*, even a hyper-subtle time (*altaf)*, of an inner time of the microcosm (*zamân anfosî)*, the time of *the Malakût*, which is the subtle world of the soul. This esoteric sense towards which Shi’ite hermeneutics points presents a more organic structure than the scheme of the four traditional senses of our medieval exegesis. Indeed, this inner meaning concerns Imamology itself in its as yet undisclosed relationships with cosmogony, anthropogony, eschatology, etc. At every hermeneutical level, we have both an esoteric (*bâtin)* content to discover and a *ta’wîl* to carry out. This is what a famous *hadîth* of the Prophet invites us to do, speaking of the seven, and even the seventy, esoteric depths of the Qur’an. *Ta'wîl* consists of tracing a thing back to its principle or archetype. It thus implies the idea of an ascending, anagogical movement. As such, hermeneutics is an *anaphora* (the act of ascending). We thus have, starting from the apparent literal text (*zâhir)*, an anaphora of that appearance and an esoteric dimension of that exoteric. One then has an esoteric interpretation of the anaphora and an anaphora of the esoteric, finally leading to the esoteric of the esoteric (*bâtin al'-bâtin).* Unfortunately, I do not have time to offer examples of this ascending hermeneutics which, as a philosopher, I find of fascinating interest.

I must confine myself to recalling this axiom of prophetology: the prophet’s mission is focused solely on the exoteric, on the descent (*tanzîl)* of the literal Revelation. What is focused on the esoteric is precisely the mission of the Imam, the Imamate, by virtue of the charisma designated by the word *walâyat* (divine favour or predilection), a term whose scope we shall attempt to examine. Prophetic anthropology helps us understand the division of this dual mission. The prophet’s way of being can be represented by three concentric circles. The central circle represents *walâyat*, that charisma of divine predilection which, *from the very beginning*, sanctifies the person of the prophet, making him a *walî*, a Friend of God, one who is close to God. The second circle, which encloses this central circle, represents *nobowwat*, the prophetic vocation and mission

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This framework makes it immediately clear why so many Shia traditions emphasise that *walâyat* is the esoteric dimension of prophecy. The prophetic mission, whatever its nature, is superimposed upon *walâyat*, and is always temporary, whereas *walâyat* is perpetual. In principle, every *nabî* is, necessarily, a *walî*, but not every *walî* is necessarily a *nabî*. The *risalât* is like the shell; the *nobowwat* is like the kernel; the *walâyat* is like the oil contained within the kernel. Hence the assertion of the pre-eminence of *walâyat* over the prophetic mission. Depending on how one understands what the inner circle represents in the person of the Prophet in relation to the outer circle, the superiority of the Prophet over the Imam may be maintained. But if one simply considers the superiority of *walâyat* as such over the prophetic mission that presupposes it, then the ever-latent tendency to affirm the superiority of the Imam over the Prophet will manifest itself. Imamite Shi'ism, as well as Fatimid Ismailism, have strived not to yield to this tendency and to maintain the balance between the exoteric and the esoteric. In contrast, the idea of the Imam's superiority over the Prophet prevails in the reformed Ismailism of Alamut, a triumph that marks the breakdown of the balance in favour of the esoteric.

This anthropology in itself justifies the categories of prophets, a division based on a prophetic gnoseology. According to a long tradition dating back to the Sixth Imam, Ja'far Sâdiq (765), there is the *nabî*, simply that, endowed with a prophecy that is in some way intransitive. There is the *nabî* who has a vision of the Angel who inspires him, but only in dreams. These two categories correspond to those who would later be designated as *Awliyâ*, 'Friends of God' (*Dustân-e Khodâ* in Persian), when, following the advent of Islam, the term *nabî* could no longer be used. These include, like *walâyat*, the idea of a secret, esoteric prophecy (*nobowwat bâtina)*. There is also the *nabî-morsal*, sent to a community, a city, or a village, but without bringing a new *sharî'at.* This figure may have visions of the Angel even whilst awake. The texts cite as an example the case of Jonah and all the prophets of Israel who lived under the law of Moses. Finally, there is the *nabî rasûl*, who is sent to reveal to mankind a new Book, a new *sharî'at*. In this case, the prophetic mission takes on the technical name of 'legislative prophecy'.

And it is from this *theological concept* that we shall see emerge the idea of a cycle which forms a continuation of the Judeo-Christian prophetic tradition of *the Verus Propheta.* Shi'ite theologians generally speak of six great prophets who have marked the periods of the prophetic cycle. They are Adam himself, as the first prophet, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, who is the 'Seal of the Prophets'. Some add the name of David, as they regard his Psalter as a separate book. Let us briefly mention in passing the Judeo-Christian prophetic tradition among the Ebionites, the 'heptad of the Mystery', the seven who were the manifestation of a *Christus aeternus:* Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus. They are the seven pillars of the world, the seven shepherds, and if one counts the Adam-Christ of whom they are the manifestation, the eight Christs among men (*octo Christos hominum,* in St Jerome), mentioned by the prophet Micah. For its part, Manichaeism professes a similar succession, incorporating figures foreign to Semitic prophecy: Adam, Seth, Noah, Jesus, Buddha, Zoroaster and Mani.

I cannot give in to the temptation to make comparisons here; we must concentrate on the way in which the figure of the Imam emerged from the framework of Shi'ite prophetology. The prophetic cycle is complete. Muhammad was the resting place of the *Verus Propheta.*

But neither Twelver Shi'ism nor Ismailism can simply accept this conclusion, which they perceive as a tragedy for humanity. For everyone agrees on the necessity of prophets. What might happen if the last prophet has already come? The prophet is not someone who predicts the future, but the inspired one who utters the word of the unseen, the superhuman being whom divine inspiration establishes as a mediator between the unknowable divinity and the ignorance or powerlessness of men. Through his mediation, the *Deus absconditus* becomes *the Deus revelatus.* The Shi'ite idea, which, as I have just pointed out, arose during the Prophet's own lifetime, emphasises the tragic aspect of the situation. If humanity has always needed prophets to survive its destiny, what might happen if there is no longer a prophet to await, if there is nothing left to look forward to? Consequently, the Book that was revealed from Heaven to the last Prophet is not a book like any other, whose meaning is limited to its apparent literalness. I quoted a moment ago, in this regard, some decisive words of the Fifth Imam. But the hidden depths of the divine Word are neither explored nor reconstructed with the aid of syllogisms. Knowledge can only be transmitted by 'those who know'. Only on this condition can it continue to expand. In short, the full reality of the Qur'anic Revelation, which encompasses both the exoteric and the esoteric, presupposes a 'Preserver of the Book' (*Qayyim al-Qur'an).*

This 'Keeper of the Book', this guide who leads us to the spiritual meaning of the Book and keeps it alive until the Last Day, is the Imam (in the Shia sense of the word, not to be confused with the *imam* who presides over a mosque). The Imam is the successor to the Prophet who sanctifies the charism of *walâyat,* which, as we have already said, is the esoteric aspect of prophecy: it is *al-amr al-bâtina,* the *esoteric reality,* and here we touch upon what constitutes the radical difference with regard to Sunni Islam. The word *walâyat* properly means 'affection', 'friendship' (the Persian *dûstî).* It is very frequently paired with the word *mahabbat,* which likewise means 'friendship', 'love'. Together, the two terms give to Imamism the character of a religion of love. The *walî,* the Friend invested with *walâyat,* must be understood in both the active and passive senses of the word. He is the one who loves and who is loved. When one speaks of the *walâyat* of the Imams, one refers to the love, the predilection, with which they are regarded by God. From the perspective of their followers, the term designates them insofar as they are the focus of the loving devotion of those followers. *Walâyat* towards the Imam is a participation in the divine *walâyat* of which the Imam is eternally the object (all thus share in the status of Friends of God. It should be noted in passing that this designation is also found among the mystics of the Rhineland school in the 14th century (the *Gottesfreunde).* Its metaphysical foundation will become clear to us shortly; as such, the *walâyat* of the Imam then takes on a cosmic meaning and function that distinguishes it from its common usage in Sufism, where the word is generally pronounced as *wilâyat* and refers to the subjective states of the mystic. But it is

It is inappropriate to translate the word *walî* (plural *awliyâ)* as ‘saints’, as is all too often done.

In short, the Imam is to the Imamite community what the heart is to the human microcosm—not the physical organ, of course, but what our authors designate as the subtle body of light that is the soul’s permanent abode, the throne upon which it takes its seat. The heart is, within the microcosm, the head and Imam of the faculties of spiritual perception.

Hence there is a perpetual interplay between what Shi’ite thinkers assert regarding the role of the Imam in the community and what occurs within each spiritual individual. It is there, at the level of this internalisation, that we understand how the Imam is the illuminator, the one who saves by kindling in the heart of man the flame of perfect knowledge, just as Christ does in Judeo-Christian prophetology.

We can thus see the fundamental difference from the Sunni conception of *the caliphate*. Although Sunni Islam uses the term ‘imam’, it refers solely to a temporal leader as the head of the social and political order; his role is essentially focused on temporal matters and social needs. It is therefore by no means necessary for him to be, as the Shi’ite concept of the Imam demands, ‘sinless’ or ‘immaculate’ (the term *ma’sûm* is the perfect equivalent of the *ânamârtêtos* of Judeo-Christian prophetology). The existence of the Imam in the Sunni sense is not necessarily imposed, and, ultimately, may be the subject of a choice expressed through *consensus.* In contrast, the Shi’ite conception endows the Imam with sacred dignity and a metaphysical function. The idea that the Imam might be chosen by men would be as ridiculous as the idea that a prophet might be chosen. Charisma does not depend on the choice of men. Whether reduced to hiding, or even to invisibility (as is currently the case with the Twelfth Imam), the Imam remains the Imam. As the ‘Keeper of the Book’, he is endowed with divinely inspired knowledge. The Qur’an is the silent Imam. The Imam is the speaking Qur’an, the inner Word that articulates the secret meaning of the Book in the heart of his faithful.

Let us therefore take a further step in the company of our Shi’ite thinkers, Mulla Sadra Shirazi and Qazi Sa’id Qommi, right up to the 17th century. Because they never separated philosophical inquiry from theological meditation, because for them the Angel of knowledge is the same as the Angel of revelation, the Angel who inspires both prophets and philosophers (a situation we in the West may have long since forgotten), our Shi’ite thinkers have succeeded in clarifying the metaphysical foundation of prophetology and imamology. Already the traditions (the *hadîth)* that go back to the Imams explicitly set forth the idea of a ‘Muhammadian Light’ created primordially. This idea is expanded into that of an ‘eternal prophetic Reality’, which certainly connotes the idea of a divine Logos, but, to be more precise, the idea of a divine pleroma eternally constituted by Fourteen entities of light, whose theophanic manifestations—but not their incarnation—are the earthly persons of the ‘Fourteen Immaculates’. Through the concept of this Light is constituted what, in

Shi’ite theology corresponds to the *Verus Propheta* of Judeo-Christian prophetology, but, simultaneously, by virtue of the original Shi’ite perception of things, this idea inseparably unites prophetology and imamology and, therefore, the exoteric and the esoteric. It is this inseparable union that determines that Shi’ism is the Islamic gnosis par excellence, to the extent that in the other non-Shi’ite regions of this same gnosis one has the impression of an imamology that no longer dares to speak its name.

3. Prophetology and Imamology

The ‘metaphysical prophetic reality’, the pleroma of glory, entails a dual aspect, a dual ‘dimension’, if one may put it that way, and consequently implies a dual manifestation. It implies an exoteric or *ad extra* dimension, which finds its manifestation in the person of the Prophet, and an esoteric dimension manifested in the person of each of the Twelve Imams, who together constitute a single and identical essence, without any confusion of persons. Together, the persons of light known in this world as the “Fourteen Immaculates”—namely, the Prophet, his daughter Fatima, and the Twelve Imams—constitute the pleroma of light of eternal prophecy. In their fleeting earthly manifestation, the Twelve were successively the ‘Keepers of the Book’, initiating their disciples into its full meaning. Their teachings as a whole form a *corpus* of over one hundred volumes in the latest Tehran edition.

This dual dimension of the Muhammadian metaphysical Reality thus implies one aspect turned towards creatures and another turned towards the Divine Presence. The former is its outward aspect; it epitomises the prophetic mission. The latter is its inward aspect; it epitomises *walâyat*, the charism of the Imams, and through them the charism of all those who are designated as Friends or Beloved of God. Once again we see here why *walâyat* signifies the esoteric aspect of prophecy and the prophetic message and, at the same time, why the light of prophecy and the light of *walâyat* are two lights that form but one; Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter, the origin of the lineage of the Imams, is the ‘confluence of these two lights’ (*Majma’ al-nûrayn).* These are the Prophet’s frequently repeated words: “Ali and I are a single Light”, which means that each of the two names, that of *the nabî* and that of *the Imam*, only becomes real through the other, in their simultaneity. They are a bi-unity, a *single-both*, just as *zâhir* and *bâtin*, *tanzîl* and *ta'wîl*, are two complementary aspects of the integral meaning of the Book.

The Twelve Imams manifest themselves across the various cosmological planes of existence, just as they manifested themselves in this world during the first three centuries of the Hegira (7th–10th centuries) and had manifested themselves with each previous prophet. Each of the great prophets listed above had their own twelve Imams. Christ, too, had his twelve Imams (not to be confused with the twelve apostles, but corresponding to the bishops of Jerusalem, successors of James, the ‘brother of the Lord’). As for the number twelve, it is the arithmosophical expression of a law of being, of a fundamental rhythm as perceived by the Twelver Shi’ite view of the world. This number embodies the inner norm of a perfect, complete totality, a ‘pleroma’, which is illustrated by relating the number twelve of the Imams to the twelve signs of the zodiac, to the twelve princes of the tribes of Israel, to the twelve springs that Moses caused to gush forth from the rock, to the twelve hours of the day and night, and so on. Furthermore, on several occasions, the Prophet of Islam declared: “The Imams after me will be twelve in number.” The twelfth will be the Imam of the Resurrection (*Qâ’im al-Qiyâmat),* the “Mahdî”, a term which can be translated as “the well-guided one” or “the one by whom one is guided”.

The *theological concept* of eternal prophetic Reality bears fruit in two respects: it preserves the affirmation of the One (*tawhîd)* from the twin traps of anthropomorphism and agnosticism, and it establishes the manifestation in this world of the dual cycle of prophecy and *walâyat.*

As regards the *first point*, it must be realised that Shi'ite theology is strictly apophatic (it admits of nothing other than *tanzîh*, the *via negationis*). No name or attribute can be ascribed to the divine Essence, which is unknowable and inaccessible. Yet it is precisely this inaccessible *Deus absconditus* that reveals itself at the level of the primordial theophany that is the Muhammadian Light, the pleroma of the Fourteen Immaculates. In the absence of this theophany, monotheism falls into metaphysical idolatry, or into allegory, which, out of a rationalist horror of the anthropomorphic image, empties the revealed text of its meaning. In Shi'ite terms, all the names, attributes and qualifications supposedly tinged with anthropomorphism refer not to the depths of the divine Essence, to *the Deus absconditus*, but to the theophanic persons of the pleroma of primordial Light, manifestations of the same divine Word. It is at the level of this primordial theophany that our positive concepts of God (those of affirmative theology) are constituted and find their meaning. This is what is tirelessly repeated by numerous traditions dating back to the Imams; for example, this one from the Fifth Imam addressing his *disciple* Jâbir: "We, the Twelve, are those positive concepts. We are the Hand of God, his side, his tongue, his command, his decision, his knowledge, his truth. We are the Face of God turned towards the earthly world, amongst you." Or also: "We are the Face of God (that of *the revealed God).* We are the templars of the divine Mystery. We are the mine of Revelation. In us lies the meaning of *the ta'wîl* (that is, the esoteric meaning of Revelation)." It is this mystery of the primordial theophany that leads Shaykh Ahmad Ahsâ'î to say: "It is towards that inaccessible Essence that man turns, even though he may never find it; and yet he never ceases to find it, even though it remains forever inaccessible to him."

The mystery of primordial theophany, according to the Shi'ite conception, thus refers us to an event that is like an eternal anthropomorphosis 'in Heaven'; it is the mystery of *the* celestial *Anthropos*, which must be discussed with reference to the Books of Enoch, the Book of the Ascension of Isaiah, and all related texts. The descent into this world of the Muhammadian Light from prophet to prophet will never be an incarnation, nor anything reminiscent of Pauline theology. Whilst it is true that Shi'ite imamology assumes a function analogous to Christology, it must at least be specified that this is rather a Christology of the angelomorphic type (*Engelchristologie)*, as found in early Christianity.

This is what gives rise to the *second aspect* in which the *theologumenon* of the Muhammadian Light bears fruit: that of its descent into this world. The superhuman nature of the Muhammadian Logos or the Muhammadian Light—that of the Fourteen Immaculate Ones—pre-exists eternally within Adamic humanity. When the Creator created Adam, He mingled a portion of that Light with the clay of 'Illîyûn (the highest rank of Paradise), and that substance of light was incorporated into the substance of Adam, as the first of the prophets. Thus is the divine dimension (the *lahût)* which, in the being of every prophet, complements the human and creaturely dimension (the *nasût),* without there ever being anything resembling a hypostatic union between the two. Through the former, the prophets receive from God; through the latter, they communicate to and with mankind. This substance of Light is then transmitted from period to period, from prophet to prophet, until it reaches the common grandfather of the Prophet of Islam and

his first Imam, ‘Abdul-Muttalib, from whom it splits to manifest itself in two distinct persons: in the person of the Prophet as the Seal of Prophethood, and in the person of the Imam as the Seal of *walâyat.*

This is also the meaning of the Prophet’s words: ‘‘Alî (that is, the Imam) has been sent secretly with every prophet before me. With me, he has been sent publicly’. These words thus point, in reality, to the idea of an eternal Imam, which corresponds to the *Christus aeternus* of Judeo-Christian prophetology regarding *the Verus Propheta*. (Let us recall that Ismailism recognises Melchizedek as the Imam of the first three periods of the cycle of prophecy).

Of course, the transmission of this Light does not depend on the physiology of the physical body; it must be understood in terms of what the concept of the subtle body of pure light—or, as we might also say, *the ‘spiritual body’*—entails. That is why it is not merely their physical descent from the Prophet (or from one of the seven great prophets) that sanctifies the twelve Imams. Their earthly kinship is nothing more than a sign of their pleromatic kinship. It is not simply by belonging to the Prophet’s family that they were Imams (there have been tens of thousands of *Imâm-zâdeh* apart from the twelve Imams); rather, on the contrary, it is because they were Imams *ab origine*, in the pleroma, that they were to be in this world the descendants and successors of the Prophet.

The *teologumenon* of the descent of the Muhammadian Light into this world determines, as we have said, the idea of the cycle of *walâyat* that follows the cycle of *nobowwat*, and thus a periodisation of the ages of the world that concerns not the external empirical history (for then its evidence would be obvious to all), but the inner history of the soul, its hierohistory. A lengthy account, which goes back to the First Imam via the Sixth, formulates this idea in a striking manner, relating it to the pleroma of the Twelve. This tradition shows us the light of prophecy—and thus of exotericism—progressing through twelve Veils of light until the perfect maturation and the emergence of *walâyat* as the esoteric aspect of prophecy. These twelve Veils of Light are the Twelve Imams and their respective twelve universes. They are also designated as ‘millenarian’, which in no way implies an arithmetic chronology, but rather corresponds to a Gnostic *Aion* (Eon), a *saeculum intelligibile.* The Muhammadian Light progresses from veil to veil, integrating within itself the esoteric aspect typified by each of the twelve Veils of Light. What is surprising—though, unfortunately, I do not have time to dwell upon it—is that this periodisation based on a rhythm of twelve corresponds to the Zoroastrian cosmogony, which is likewise structured around twelve millennia. Moreover, this is not the only example that leads us to find traces of the Zoroastrian theology of ancient Persia within the theology of Shi’ite Iran.

This division of the ages of the world does not, of course, stem from any empirical observation. Far from it; it precedes and determines all empirical observation. It is the *a priori Imago* that enables us to give shape to something such as a history. The Shia conception of sacred history is expressed in the idea of a double cycle. The cycle of prophecy is closed; that much is clear. Everyone in Islam agrees on this point. Sunni Islam stops at this assertion, and it is by turning, in a sense, towards the past that the believer receives the

message of the last prophet. For Shi’ism, both Imamite and Ismaili, the cycle of prophecy that is closed is the cycle of legislative prophecy. But with that closure something new begins, so new that, whilst extending the spiritual vocation of the ancient un sent prophets, this new cycle can no longer bear their name, as we have said, to avoid any ambiguity.

This new cycle is known as *the 'cycle* of *walâyat'*, the cycle of spiritual initiation, the cycle of those Friends of God who, strictly speaking, are only the Imams, but who, in a broader sense, are all those encompassed by their *walâyat.* Thus, Shi'ism maintains an open awareness of the future. Something essential is still to be awaited. Not everything has yet been accomplished. That which is awaited is the parousia of the Twelfth Imam, the Imam "currently hidden from the senses but present in the hearts of his faithful". By remaining in this eschatological expectation, as early Christian consciousness did, and as Jewish spirituality still does, Shi'ism escapes the dangers of history—or, to be more precise, what we today call historicism. Just as the Prophet was the 'Seal of legislative prophecy', so the Muhammadian Imamate is the Seal of *walâyat,* as the esoteric dimension of prophecy, in the dual person of the First Imam as the Seal of universal *walâyat* and of the Twelfth Imam as the Seal of the particular *walâyat* of the *walâyat* cycle.

The mysterious person of the Twelfth Imam embodies the speculative life and the deepest spirituality of Twelver Imamism. One can speak of him only with the utmost discretion, even though the accounts concerning him have given rise to extensive works. The Twelfth Imam is present in both the past and the future. A five-year-old boy, he mysteriously disappeared when his young father, the Eleventh Imam, Hasan 'Askarî, left this world (260/873). Thus began the period known as the 'Minor Occultation', during which the Imam was visible only to a few close associates. Later, his fourth deputy received from him the order not to appoint a successor, conveyed in a poignant letter in which the Imam announced that he would no longer be visible until the hour of his parousia, and that anyone who appealed to him for public action would *ipso facto* be an impostor. Thus began the period of the 'Greater Occultation' (329/940).

We are thus faced with a period spanning more than ten centuries in which the Twelfth Imam—the awaited Imam, the Beloved—is, in his very person, the very history of Shi'ite consciousness. Here we must guard against the false dilemma into which our Western mindset is wont to fall by asking: myth or history? The hagiography or hierology of the Twelfth Imam is neither myth nor history. It would therefore be absurd to speak of 'demythologisation', and there is no place for it. We must relearn to consider the full reality of events which nevertheless do not occur in our empirical world, to which we abusively reserve the privilege of being real events. The hagiography of the Twelfth Imam is still unfinished; it fills the entire duration of his Occultation; its events are manifold. It is a story that takes place in the *Malakût,* in the world of the soul that man finds within himself. It is a story that has the power to draw its faithful away from what we commonly call history. Undoubtedly, during the time of the Great Occultation, the Imam is visible only in dreams; he is sometimes visible in the waking state as well, but then the one who has had that privilege is not conscious of his experience until *afterwards*, and can never take advantage of it to proclaim a message of a temporal nature. To do so would be, *in and of itself,* to don the mask of imposture. History is not made in the ordinary sense of the word through theophanic visions, for these in themselves transport one to another world. That is the 'eschatological dimension', and this is

realised in the act except through a visionary or liturgical experience; it is, on each occasion, a new anticipation.

The Prophet Muhammad had announced on several occasions: "If this world had but a single day left to last, God would prolong that day until a man of my lineage appeared, whose name would be my name. He will fill the earth with peace and justice, a land which until then had been filled with violence and tyranny. He will fight for the *ta'wîl* (the spiritual interpretation) just as I myself have fought for the *tanzîl* (the descent of Revelation in its literal sense)." The day that God extends until the advent of the Twelfth Imam is, for the faithful Shia, precisely the time in which we now live. It is the period of the Great Occultation *(ghaybat),* which preserves imamology from falling into history, that is, from being consigned to the past. And it is necessary, since only twelve Imams cover the cycle of *walâyat.*

The time of the Hidden Imam is an intermediate time 'between times' (just as the subtle world, the imaginal world, is intermediate between the intelligible and the sensible). Its history—or rather, its hierohistory—in the consciousness of its faithful, is the maturation of this 'interim' until the transformation of time into another time, the time of eternity. That is why it is not in the time of this world that one has a vision of the Imam. The visionary then finds himself 'between the times'. In the person of the Twelfth Imam, who will bring not a new Book, a new Law, but the hidden meaning of all that has preceded him, it can be said that Shi'ism has sensed the deepest mystery of human history, for that mystery cannot be confined within the limits of history itself. It has sensed it in the same way that Zoroastrianism sensed it in the person of the Saoshyant; Mahayana Buddhism in the person of the future Buddha, the Buddha Maitreya; all Jewish prophecy in the person of the Messiah King; and the eschatological consciousness of early Christianity, such as that of the Joachimites who, in the 13th century, announced the nearness of the reign of the Holy Spirit, the eternal Gospel.

The parousia of the Twelfth Imam must be understood in the same way that eschatological Christianity spoke of *the caro spiritualis Christi.* One should therefore avoid the term 'Docetism' in this context, or rather, learn to regard Docetism as the first pertinent critique of theological knowledge as such. *Caro spiritualis* means neither phantom nor fantasy. It is paradoxical that in our day it is harder to understand this than to understand post-Christian ideologies. Unlike these, every appearance of the Imam is a sign of a renewal of humanity. This is precisely the profound meaning that the mystical theosophers of Shi'ism attribute to the *ghaybat,* the occultation of the Imam. If the Imam is currently hidden, it is because people have become incapable of seeing him. The parousia is not an event that will suddenly occur one fine day. It is something that matures slowly, day by day, in the consciousness of the Imam's faithful. It is these faithful who anticipate the role of those who, on the day of the parousia, will be the 'companions of the Imam'. 'To be a companion of the Imam' is a Shia aspiration that coincides, surprisingly, with the aspiration of the Zoroastrian believers of ancient Persia: to be 'companions of the Saoshyant'. The aspiration to this *companionship* developed, both in ancient Zoroastrian Iran and in Shi'ite Iran, the ethic of a spiritual chivalry that carries within itself the salvation of the future.

I have attempted to describe, with perhaps overwhelming conciseness, what Shi'ite prophetology means both for philosophical thought and for the spiritual life of the Shi'ite community.

I would like to conclude this talk with a reference that corroborates the connections I have sought to suggest between the spiritual forms found in the three great families of the Abrahamic tradition. To conclude, therefore, I shall refer to the identification expressly affirmed by numerous Shi'ite thinkers between the Twelfth Imam and the Paraclete announced in the Gospel of John.

4. The Paracletic Horizon of Shi'ite Prophetic Theology[2]

The limited time at our disposal allows us, here too, only to recall and suggest. First and foremost is the vast number of texts gathered in the great encyclopaedia of Shi'ite traditions entitled *The Ocean of Lights*, compiled in the 17th century by the Isfahan theologian Mohammad Bâqir Majlisî. These are testimonies drawn from the Bible, the Old and New Testaments, whose grouping serves a specific purpose: to justify a prophetology which, as we have noted, broadly takes up the idea of the *Verus Propheta* professed by early Judeo-Christianity. The initial aim is to establish the identification of the Paraclete with the person of the Prophet Muhammad. We know that Mani, the prophet of Manichaeism, had already been identified by his followers with the Paraclete. But through this collection of texts, Shi'ite thought transfers this identification to the Twelfth Imam. The transition is prepared by extraordinary sermons which Shi'ite gnosis attributes to the First Imam, and in which he declares, for example: 'I am the one who is called Elijah in the Gospel', or also: 'I am the second Christ'.

The theme finds its greatest elaboration in the monumental work of an Iranian Shi'ite shaykh who lived at the beginning of this century (Shaykh 'Alî Akbar Nahâvandî) and who was familiar with both Zoroastrian literature and the Bible as a whole, which he read in a Persian translation by the Bible Society. The shaykh distinguishes a double epiphany of the Paraclete announced in the Gospel: the first in the person of the Prophet, messenger of the eternal *sharî'at*. The second in the person of the Twelfth Imam, messenger of *the ta'wîl.* It is most surprising to observe how a Shia theologian engages with the Gospel of John and chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation. It would be desirable for our theological studies in the West not to continue to ignore this fact.

But there is more to it than that. We can trace this paracletic horizon of Shi'ite prophetology throughout the centuries. I shall cite just a few examples. We find it in the 12th century in Sohravardî, the young and intrepid shaykh who, in Islamic Iran, revived the philosophy of Light professed by the sages of ancient Persia. His influence has been felt right up to the present day among Iranian thinkers. In the 14th century, a mystical theosophist of the first rank, Haydar Âmolî (from Âmol, on the shores of the Caspian Sea), whose work sheds new light on the link between Shi'ism and Sufism, writes verbatim as follows: "He who the

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[2] For a more detailed study of this point, see H. Corbin, 'L'Idée du Paraclet en philosophie iranienne', in *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme,* Flammarion, Paris, 1983, pp. 311–358. *(Translator's note)*

Christians call the Paraclete is the one whom we, Shiites, call the Awaited Imam (the Twelfth Imam)".

In the 15th century, another great Twelver Imamite theosophist, Ibn Abi Jomhûr, explicitly states that the promise of the Paraclete announced in the Gospel of John refers to the parousia of the Twelfth Imam, who is to provide the *ta'wîl* (spiritual meaning) of the divine revelations. Furthermore, in the 17th century, Qotboddîn Ashkevârî, a disciple of Mîr Dâmâd, the great master of thought of the Isfahan school, explicitly identifies the Twelfth Imam with the Saoshyant of Zoroastrian soteriology. Iranian Shi'ism presents us here, through its greatest thinkers, not with a facile syncretism, but with a mirror-like phenomenon in which the great figures of prophetic and soteriological drama reflect one another.

One final feature. As late as the 19th century, an Iranian Imamite theosophist, Ja'far Kashfî, developed, around a sermon by the First Imam, an extraordinary epic of Intelligence, the Nous-Logos, to which is opposed an Ahrimanian counter-epic of ignorance, agnosia. The drama reaches its dénouement with the manifestation of the Twelfth Imam, the summit and culmination of a periodisation of the ages of the world, whose analogies between the Joachimites and the philosophers influenced by them—as far as Schelling and Berdiaev—we ought to consider.

We find the poignant sentiment of this cosmic drama once again in Ismaili prophetology, to which our next lecture will be devoted. Certainly, the dominant *ethos* of Shi'ite consciousness may strike us as one of profound pessimism, but let us correct this immediately, for it is a pessimism that never despairs, a pessimism that trusts: *desperatio fiducialis*, as our Luther used to say.

Tehran, 7 January 1975.

II
Ismaili Prophetic Tradition

1. Twelver Shi’ism and Ismaili Shi’ism

Our first lecture was devoted to one of the two main forms of Shia Islam, namely Twelver Imamism or Shia Islam of the Twelve Imams. Today we shall discuss the prophetology professed by the other of these two major Shi’ite branches, namely, Ismailism. This owes its name not to Ishmael, son of Abraham, but to Imam Ismâ’îl, son of the Sixth Imam, Ja’far Sâdiq. The affinities between the two Shi’ite branches are, of course, close. The prophetology and imamology of both are centred on the idea of *the Verus Propheta*, whose precise traces in the prophetology of Twelver Shi’ism we have already highlighted. Furthermore, up to the sixth Imam, Ja'far Sâdiq (d. 765), one of the great figures of imamology, the imamatic lineage—and with it the *corpus* of traditions—is the same for the two great families of Shi’ism. It is from the succession of the Sixth Imam onwards that the different rhythm governing their respective worldviews becomes apparent: among the Imamites, the law of the number *twelve* predominates*;* among the Ismailis, the law of the number *seven.* There is, of course, the temporal aspect of events, which I shall recall very briefly, but which in reality depends on an inner imperative that governs the architecture of the doctrinal edifice and determines the perspective of spiritual life.

As regards the temporal aspect, I shall first recall the only legitimate names by which the Ismaili community accepts being referred to. There is the name ‘Septimanos’, which refers to an imamology that views the lineage of the Imams who succeed one another in groups of seven or heptads. There is the name ‘Batinis’, literally the ‘esotericists’, which quite rightly describes the Gnostics who profess that all external or exoteric (*zâhir*) content has an inner or esoteric (*bâtin*) meaning. Finally, or rather first and foremost, there is the term "Ismailism", which is linked to the 7th Imam, Imam Ismâ'îl, son of Imam Ja'far Sâdiq. Unfortunately, Ismâ'îl died before his father, and Imam Ja'far passed the imamate not to his son, but to Ismâ'îl’s brother, Imam Mûsâ Kâzem, whom Twelver Shi’ites regard as the seventh Imam, whilst the Ismailis pledge their allegiance to Imam Mohammad, son of Ismâ'îl. Therefore, we must not confuse Ishmaelites with Ismailis. When we say ‘Ismailis’, the term refers not to Ishmael, son of Abraham, but to Ismâ'îl, son of Imam Ja'far, to whom his followers showed boundless devotion.

The premature death of Imam Ismâ'îl marked the beginning of the Ismaili imamate’s period of secrecy, which should not be confused with the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, as conceived by Twelver Shi’ism. This period of secrecy lasted until the triumphant advent of the Fatimid dynasty in Cairo in 297/909, under Imam 'Obaydallâh. The line of Fatimid imams continued for over two centuries. It is marked by great figures and momentous events.

We shall mention just two names: that of the sixth Fatimid Imam, al-Hâkim bi-Amrillah (who died aged 36 in 411/1021), who is regarded as the founder of the Druze movement and religion, and that of the eighth Fatimid Imam, al-Mustansir bi-l-lâh, whose death in 487/1094 led to the split of the Ismaili community into two major branches, one loyal to Imam Nizâr, the other to Imam Mosta'lî (the two sons of al-Mustansir). This regrettable division has persisted to this day. However, some five years before the death of al-Mustansir (in 1090), Hasan Sabbâh had established the fortress of Alamut, in north-western Iran, as an Ismaili stronghold. This was the place of refuge where, according to Ismaili tradition, a few intrepid followers were able to secretly bring the grandson of Imam Nizâr, who had been assassinated in Cairo. Thus the legitimate imamate lineage was preserved.

Whilst the ancient Fatimid *da'wat* was to lose its Imam with the disappearance of the young son (*al-Tayyib*) of the last Fatimid (Imam al-Âmir in 524/1130), and found itself practically in the same situation as Twelver Imamism, whose Imam is currently invisible to human eyes, lo and behold, on 8 August 1164 an event erupted in Alamut which, whilst having no impact on the world of external history, nonetheless reverberated as a liturgical mystery in the *Malakût*, the subtle world. On that day, Imam Hasan *âla dhkri-hi's-salâm* (Hasan, may salvation be upon his name) proclaimed the Great Resurrection, which made Ismaili Islam a personal initiatory religion of resurrection, definitively confirming the precedence of the Imam over the Prophet, of the esoteric over the exoteric, and of spiritual truth, the *Haqîqat*, over the literal appearance of religious law (*Sharî'at*). We have already explained why this tendency is always latent in Shi'ism. In 1256, the Ismaili strongholds in Iran—Alamut and the others—were ravaged by the Mongols. Yet the reformed Ismailism of Alamut was not destroyed. It has endured in Iran, century after century, under the guise of Sufism, and has spread to India. This is the branch known there as that of the Khojas, who are the followers of H.H. the Agha Khan, whilst the ancient Fatimid *da'wat*, known as that of the Bohras, is headed by a *Dâ'î*, a term inadequately translated as 'high priest'.

Here, in broad strokes, are some of the facts. The richness of Ismaili literature has only been known to us for just over a generation. It derives almost entirely from the Fatimid tradition. The Ismaili literature of Alamut, in the Persian language, perished almost entirely in the Mongol storm. Fortunately, a number of treatises reappeared in the mid-20th century, thanks to the obscure but tenacious work of the late W. Ivanov. Despite its great interest, we shall not have time to discuss it here. We must confine ourselves to outlining the broad features of Ismaili prophetology according to the abundant bibliography, of which, however, perhaps only a tenth, no more, is finally accessible to us. A curious fact: whilst the Twelver Shiites have spent several centuries gathering, amidst the perils of clandestinity, the *corpus* of their Imams' traditions, and the monuments of strictly Imamite thought do not appear until Nasîr Tûsi (13th century)—or, more precisely, the eminent mystical theosophist Haydar Âmoli (14th century)— here we find that, from the 10th century onwards, Ismaili manuscripts offer us complete treatises, fully developed speculative works, without our being able to say what preceded and prepared them. They are more than sufficient to enable us to extract the broad outlines of

Ismaili prophetology, and of its proximity to, but also its originality in relation to, Twelver Imamism.

Our sources on this subject will be primarily the work of a prolific 10th-century Iranian Ismaili author, Hamîd Kermânî, and that of a 15th-century Yemeni *dâ'î*, Idrîs 'Imâdoddin. We shall focus essentially on four points:

1. There is a profound consensus between the two major systems of Shi'ite thought regarding apophatic theology: the *via negationis holds that* the *Deus absconditus* can be ascribed neither a name, nor an attribute, nor a qualification. He is the 'Mystery of Mysteries'. Just as in Duodeciman theosophy this divine unknowability was transcended by the primordial theophany of the pleroma of the Fourteen Immaculate Ones, so too here it is transcended by a theophany, namely that of a First-Created Archangel-Logos, who is the 'first prophet', the one whose call resounds 'in Heaven'.

2. From this initial Archangel-Logos proceeds an archangelic theory of Intelligences which form, as in the philosophers al-Farabi and Avicenna, a supreme pleroma of ten cherubic Intelligences. It is within this pleroma that the "drama in heaven" unfolds, the drama proper to Adamology (that of the spiritual Adam), a drama that inextricably links the initiative of the demiurge who created our world and the meaning of the prophets' mission in this world. This episode bears many resemblances to the Books of Enoch and Manichaean cosmogony.

3. In this demiurgy originates the succession of cycles of epiphany and concealment, the succession of imams according to a septenary rhythm, the consummation of each cycle marking a new degree of elevation in the spiritual Adam's—the Angel of humanity's—reconquest of his original rank in the Pleroma.

4. This ascent, through which humanity reclaims its lost paradise, requires that the door to the eschatological future remain open. It is impossible to accept that everything is closed with the one who was the Seal of the Prophets. Ismaili prophetology develops, like that of Twelver Shi'ism, within a paracletic horizon, but as a certain page of a text undoubtedly predating the Fatimids will show us, it does so with a boldness unparalleled in Islam.

2. Apophatic theology and 'heavenly' prophetology

"Mystery of Mysteries", "He before whom the audacity of thought falters": it is through such allusive phrases that Ismaili gnosis, like all gnosis, designates the First Principle. The *Absconditum* transcends everything that can be affirmed of it and everything that can be denied of it. The *via negationis*, apophatic theology, can only be conceived as a double negation: the negation of all affirmation and the negation of all negation. The unknowable, ineffable Principle evokes being, makes the being of the First Created imperative, which is its Logos, its Word. It is the First Intelligence of the archangelic pleroma. The only divine selfhood of which we can speak is the knowledge that this Intelligence, this First Word, possesses, by virtue of its

the very act of existing, of the Principle that brings it into being. The selfhood of the Principle is the knowledge that this Intelligence can attain of it by understanding itself. It understands that *it is* of the being that it *is not*, of the being that it owes to Another. But how will this negativity reveal a positive selfhood of the Principle? If it were to assert that the Principle is a being that knows itself, the Intelligence would do no more than define itself, define the Principle as if it were what the Intelligence itself is, and the Principle that establishes being would become a fact-being.

The premises of Ismaili theosophy constantly place it once again before the abyss of first philosophy. These same premises are found in the theosophy of Twelver Shi'ism (the school of Rajab 'Ali Tabrizi, the school of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsâ'î). It does not begin by necessarily positing being as an act of being. Unlike the philosophers (those of the school of Avicenna or Sohravardî), the Being that is the First-Being is not here the Founding Principle of being. That Founding Principle remains beyond being and non-being, as *hyperousion*, Super-being. The First Being is never more than the First fact-being. It is He who is the First Light, the Light of Lights. Our category of being never extends beyond being already born into being, to *the fact-being.*

In its act of self-knowledge, the First Archangelic Intelligence thus denies itself divinity and attests to it as belonging to its Principle. This is its *tawhîd*, the attestation of the One which it celebrates as an eternal liturgy. It is by this act that the *Protoktistos* deserves to be designated as the *Sâbiq*, the one who precedes, the one who goes before, at the summit of the primordial pleroma. Now, it is precisely this that causes, paradoxically, the name of the divinity (*al-Lâh)* to resonate in fact as an echo within that archangelic Intelligence, and this in a double sense. Undoubtedly, the etymology of the name *al-Lâh*, as understood by some Arab grammarians—an interpretation to which our Ismaili theosophers adhere—may not meet with the approval of modern philologists specialising in Semitic languages. But that is not the point. For us, it is a spiritual matter; it is a question of knowing what our Ismaili thinkers conceive under the name of *al-Lâh*, and it is not modern, secular philology that can decide on this.

It is in a double sense, then, that the archangel *Protoktistos* is the bearer of the supreme divine Name. In the sense that he is overwhelmed by sorrow, he is gripped by anguish at the realisation of his Origin, because he lacks the capacity to attain it. Now, this is what the root *whl* expresses, which connotes anguish, the longing of the traveller lost in the desert, or that of the child separated from its mother. The names *Ilâh* (God) and *ilâhîyat* (divinity) are related to this verbal root, so that the original form of the name *Ilâh* (cf. the Hebrew *Eloha)* would be *Wilâh*. The Archangel-Logos sighs with sadness, plunged into the longing for a knowledge that nothing created, nothing brought into being, can attain. The second meaning merely complements the first; it concerns the First Intelligence no longer as subject, but as object of that longing. It is given the name *Ilâh-Wilâh* because the entire supreme archangelic pleroma is dazzled by the very same sadness in its presence, is wounded by the anguish before the glory and majesty that the act of its *tawhîd* has bestowed upon it.

Let us recall, then, essentially—as the mystery of the pleroma—that it is because the First Intelligence, the First Created, denies itself divinity, recognising that this lies beyond itself, that it is invested with the name of divinity, precisely because its denial—its self-abnegation—is the sole selfhood of the Principle that we can know. It is the *Deus revelatus*, the primordial theophany. And in this theophany, the supreme Name under which the divine mystery is revealed is a name that signifies sadness and longing. Divine hyper-presence is thus essentialised in negativity, in the sadness of the created Logos, the first Archangel of the pleroma.

From this point, we can understand the way in which our Ismaili theosophers analyse the esoteric structure of *tawhîd*, the Islamic profession of faith: *La ilâha illâ Allâh.* It is usually translated into our languages as: 'There is no god but God', *Nullus deus nisi Deus.*

This exoteric translation is perfectly harmless and fails to capture what the Arabic construction conceals. The Ismailis analyse it as follows. First stage: *La ilâha*, there is no God, a universal negative proposition immediately followed by the exception *illâ*, a particular affirmative proposition that is not prepared by any logical premise. *Illâ Allâh*: and yet (despite that), there is *this God*, this God upon whom the name *Allâh* actually falls (which is why it is necessary here to translate the Arabic definite article with the demonstrative).

And just as in Avicenna's cosmogony it is from the first of the three acts of contemplation of the First Intellect (the act by which it contemplates its Principle) that the Second Intellect[3] arises, so too here it is from that challenge posed by *Illâ Allâh* that the Second Intellect proceeds from the first. The First is the First Created; the Second is the First Emanated, that is, emanated from the First. To these two celestial hierarchs designated as the *Sâbiq* (the one who precedes) and the *Tâli* (the one who follows) will correspond in the earthly hierarchy every great prophet and his First Imam. From the celestial dyad emanates a Third Intelligence, which is the spiritual Adam, the metaphysical Adam or celestial *Anthrôpos*, with whom the 'drama in Heaven' will unfold, the outcome of which will be introduced upon the earth through the manifestations of *the Verus Propheta.*

To understand this drama, let us consider the esoteric meaning that Ismailism attributes to *tawhîd*. The brief analysis offered a moment ago finds its application in each of the degrees of the dual esoteric hierarchy. Our authors define *tawhîd* as spiritual knowledge, the gnosis of each of the ranks or degrees (*hodûd*, 'limits') of the celestial and terrestrial hierarchies, and the recognition that each of these ranks is unique in its position, extending back to the One of the Ones. It is, in a sense, a monadological conception of *tawhîd.* To disrupt this 'order of being' is to ruin the entire cosmos, both spiritual and natural. That is why the First Intelligence summons the entire pleroma to profess *tawhîd.* Now, this is the quintessential act of the prophetic mission. The archangelic First Intelligence is thus the first prophet. The prophetic mission begins 'in Heaven'. Furthermore, this summons (*da'wat)* will have its continuation on earth, and that is the very name given to the Ismaili brotherhood. It is the *da'wat*,

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[3] On Avicenna's cosmology, see H. Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Narrative,* Paidós, Barcelona, 1995, chaps. I and II. (*Translators' note*)

the “Summoning”, the “Call”. Unfortunately, this Call will not be heard immediately by the Third Intelligence, which is the celestial *Anthropos*, the Angel Adam or primordial Adam. From this will follow that “drama in Heaven” which explains the wretched state of our earthly humanity. Let us say that everything happens as if the first chapters of Genesis corresponded to the day after a drama that befell a world prior to ours, the day after a catastrophe preceding earthly humanity.

3. The ‘drama in Heaven’ and prophetic tradition on earth

The First Emanation, the Second Archangelic Intelligence, responds immediately to the prophetic Call of the First, denying itself divinity and acknowledging the pre-eminence of the Intelligence that precedes it.

But behold, the Second Emanation—that is to say, the Third Intelligence, the Celestial Adam—is overcome by vertigo, by a stupor that paralyses his *tawhîd*. The First Intelligence had been dazzled by the abyss of its Principle. The Celestial Adam is dazzled by himself. He does not see that the *hadd* (the rank) that precedes him defines the limits of his horizon, sending him beyond it. He believes he can reach his Principle directly. He thus ruins the mediation of monadological *tawhîd* and thereby falls into the trap of metaphysical idolatry from which he wished to flee, and into which will in turn fall, 'in Heaven' and on earth, all those of his own who are unaware of the mediations without which *tawhîd* is impossible. This stupor that immobilises the celestial Adam opens an interval during which seven other Intelligences proceed. These are the "Seven Divine Verbs" of whom the Qur'an says that they went forth to meet Adam, although it must be borne in mind that we are speaking here of the celestial Adam.

"To meet him", it is said, because from that moment on those seven Intelligences precede him. Behold, in fact, that the celestial Adam, immobilised by his stupor and his rejection, loses his rank as the Third Intelligence of the pleroma and finds himself displaced to the place of the Tenth. He thus occupies the same rank (with the same function) as the Tenth of the hierarchical Intelligences in Avicenism, who is at once the Angel of Knowledge and the Angel of Revelation, the active Intelligence, the Holy Spirit, the Archangel Gabriel. But Avicennism is unfamiliar with that 'drama in Heaven' described by Ismaili cosmogony, a drama which the latter essentially expresses as a 'delay'. The regression of the Celestial Adam from the rank of the Third to that of the Tenth Intelligence is a 'delay of eternity', 'delayed eternity'. This delay is measured by the other Seven Intelligences that preceded him during the celestial Adam's descent, and this septenary will set the rhythm for all the earthly periods of prophetology and soteriology. The dénouement of the drama inaugurated in Heaven will take place through an "involution of time", a time that is nothing other than the interval of a "delayed eternity".

But the Seven Intelligences, the Seven divine Verbs emanated in their "absence", come to the aid of the celestial Adam, first and foremost the Second Intelligence, the First Emanation, towards whom the celestial Adam was essentially at fault for failing to recognise the necessity of its mediation, inscribed in the very law of being. The Second Intelligence feels compassion and mercy for the celestial Adam; it recognises that he has not persisted in an error he committed deliberately. It excuses and forgives him, and communicates to him that divine 'sap' (also designated as the 'Pillar of Light') which, from the First Intelligence, had spread to it. Then the Darkness that had formed within the celestial Adam due to his doubt and the straying of his thought detaches itself and separates from him. That Darkness was the Iblis, the Satan whom Adam tears from himself and casts into the abyss, but who, unfortunately, will reappear in the course of the periods of our earthly *Aeon*. One might say that the celestial Adam plays here the role of an Archangel Michael who has achieved victory over an Iblis (a Belial, an Ahriman) who had previously been hidden within him. This is also an aspect of the neo-Zoroastrianism characteristic of Ismailism (as of the Gayormathians of whom Shahrastânî speaks): the Darkness cannot arise here at the level of the First Principle, but only at the level of an Emanation from it.

Furthermore, this is a Darkness (an Ahriman) that has already been vanquished, but whose offensive returns perpetuate the human drama on earth until the parousia of the Resurrector.

Each of the Intelligences of the Pleroma constitutes a universe comprising Intelligences and innumerable Forms of light; following the example of the First Intelligence, the Third—now the Tenth—our heavenly Adam, the Angel of the human race, makes the *da'wat*, the second Call of the 'prophecy in Heaven', heard by all the members of his pleroma. All, in fact, had become immobilised in the same delay as their Angel. Almost all respond with a refusal: "Neither you nor they (the Archangels of the Pleroma) have pre-eminence over us, for we are all beings of the primordial Creation." Through this refusal, a Darkness condenses within them which they perceive and which terrifies them. The threefold movement they attempt to free themselves from it only serves to thicken their being even further and give them the three dimensions of material volume. In reality, this threefold movement had been willed by the Tenth Angel, the heavenly Adam, who had understood that no salvation would be possible for them if they remained in the pure spiritual world. Their redemption was to be achieved through the trial of passing through our corruptible physical world. That is why the Angel of our humanity, the heavenly Adam, becomes the demiurge of our physical world. There were the rebels, certainly; but there were also the repentant, the wavering. Each of them was established in the cosmos in the rank corresponding to their being.

Let us make two observations in passing. The first is that this cosmogony reminds us in all its features of the phases of Manichaean cosmogony. Here too, the cosmos is an immense defensive machine, designed to allow the escape of the fragments of Light captive within Darkness. And here, as in Manichaean gnosis, the demiurge is not the evil archon of certain Gnostic systems (for example, Jaldaboth). Furthermore, he is not external to the pleroma of light, but belongs to it. He becomes the demiurge of this world only out of compassion, to come to the aid of his own in their struggle. The second observation relates to the feeling of being a stranger, an exile, common to both the Manichaean adept and the adept of the Ismaili *da'wat*. Becoming aware of this exile is the first response to the prophetic Call. There is therefore no opposition here between Gnostic religion and prophetic religion, as is often claimed, since the prophetic Call is precisely the call to embark upon the great adventure of the Return. The Angel of humanity is himself an exile who must regain his place in the pleroma with the help of all his own. This struggle is what gives meaning to his life, for its resolution lies beyond this life.

Once the cosmos had been formed, there was an initial cycle governed by the septenary principle, which we now understand to be the very law of being, and whose astronomical manifestation is the seven planets. That cycle, in the intention of the demiurge Angel, was intended to prepare the Earth to receive the three natural kingdoms and become the dwelling-place of earthly man. It is called the 'cycle of Saturn' because Saturn was the first to be invested with the regency of this universe, and it comprises seven planetary periods (seven millennia). Thereafter, each planet governs a new cycle, each aided by the other six. The seven cycles of seven millennia (the latter term taken in its arithmosophical, not statistical, sense) make up a grand cycle of
49,000 years, to which is added the millennium in which the primordial earthly Adam was manifested. That millennium is the last, the one that closes all the cycles of epiphany and concealment,

and is that of the Imam of the Resurrection who prepares the advent of the next cycle. Here, then, begins the denouement of the 'drama in Heaven' with the transfer of the prophetic tradition to earth.

This first Great Cycle effectively brings about a slow cosmic alchemy, at the end of which a being of marvellous beauty and stature emerges amongst the beings on earth who were still pre-human. This being makes his appearance in the region where the best climatic and astronomical conditions prevail, namely, on the island of Ceylon. He appears there at the same time as 27 other people similar to him, but in relation to whom he is like the rising Sun in relation to the stars. As for their total number of 28, this is related to the 28 lunar mansions. This being is the physical personification of the primordial pleroma. He is the universal, integral Man, the *Pananthrôpos* or original earthly Adam, who must not be confused either with the celestial spiritual Adam (the Angel Adam), of whom he is an epiphany (not an incarnation), nor with the partial Adam who will inaugurate our current cycle of concealment. He was both the first prophet and the first Imam on earth. He makes the Call, the *da'wat*, heard by his own, and his own respond to him, just as they had previously, 'in Heaven', assented to the call of the demiurge Angel. The differentiation between humans and their respective destinies, the secrets of anthropogony, has its origin, in effect, in the 'drama in heaven' that took place before the ages. In turn, this initial earthly Adam denies himself and denies divinity to his own. He is the first of the men of God, not the God-man, and he establishes on earth the esoteric hierarchy that reproduces the structure of the celestial hierarchy, constituted by all the Gnostics, the receptacles of that pre-eternal divine sap which is gnosis, knowledge in the true sense (*'ilm haqîqî).*

The cycle of this initial Adam was, according to the technical Ismaili lexicon, a cycle of epiphany, that is to say, of total spiritual freedom, a reign of the unveiled esoteric, where the human condition, even in its physical particulars, was a paradisiacal condition. At the end of this new 50,000-year cycle, the original Adam was taken to the domain of the Tenth Angel, the demiurge Angel, along with all his own, who constitute his Temple of Light. That cycle of epiphany was followed by a cycle of concealment, and the alternation from cycle to cycle continues in a dizzying totality until the Resurrection of Resurrections. Some Ismaili authors estimate the total duration of the Great Cycles at 360,000 times 360,000 years!

But then, what does the transition from a cycle of epiphany to a cycle of concealment consist of, and why does it occur? The clearest answer, of course, concerns the transition to our present cycle of concealment from the cycle of epiphany that immediately preceded it. Our authors mention that during the last three millennia of the previous cycle of epiphany, disturbances arose that made it necessary to re-establish the discipline of the arcane. Humanity became unworthy of the disclosure of the mysteries, and it was necessary to re-establish the reign of the Law, of the *sharî'at.*

Here I summarise, in a nutshell, the entire 'drama on earth'. The last Imam of the cycle of epiphany, named Honayd, appoints his son, the young Adam—the Adam of the Book of Genesis and the Qur'an—as Imam; he is the initiator of our present cycle of concealment and the first manifestation of *the Verus*

Propheta in this very cycle. But all those who, at the dawn of the new cycle, repeat the rebellion that arose in the Pleroma against the celestial Adam, refuse to recognise him. They are led by the one who is at that moment the reappearance of Iblis-Ahriman, and who is called Hârith ibn Morra. He has been created of fire (the fire of the esoteric). Why should he bow down before a creature of clay, that is to say, subject to the law of the exoteric?

He then hypocritically attempts to arouse the young Adam's compassion: why deny the men of the new cycle what constituted the glory of humans in their angelic state during the cycle of epiphany? And Adam succumbs to this appeal to his generosity. He makes the mistake of usurping, as a mere initial prophet of the cycle, the mission reserved for the future and final Imam of that same cycle, the herald of the Great Resurrection. It was not, therefore, on his part, a rebellion against the divine, but a clouding of judgement in the face of the act of generosity that was being asked of him (incidentally, this conception harmonises with that of Shi'ite Adamology in general, and coincides with the Ebonite conception of Adam *anamártêtos).*

Adam, the first manifestation of *the Verus Propheta* in our cycle, gives his name to its first period. He is followed by five further periods of prophecy: those of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Each of these six prophets is a *Nâtiq*, the proclaimer of a new religious law (*sharî'at)*, the messenger of a new Book. They will be followed by a seventh Nâtiq, who will not in fact proclaim a new Law, but who, according to the conception common to all Shi'ism, will reveal the hidden, esoteric meaning of all previous Revelations: he is the one known as the *Qâ'im al-Qiyâmat*, the Imam of the Great Resurrection (*Qiyâmat al-Qiyâmat).* Each prophet who gives his name to a period of prophecy is followed, not by twelve Imams, as in Twelver Shi'ism, but by seven, or even by several sets of seven Imams. Each period of the prophetic cycle ends with a *Qiyâmat*, a minor resurrection, brought about by the last Imam of the period and preparing the way for the dawn of a new period, for example, from Moses to Jesus, from Jesus to Muhammad. The Muhammadian period is the last of these. It will end, and with it the seven millennia of our cycle will end, with the parousia of the last Imam, herald of the Resurrection of Resurrections, that is, of the Great Resurrection, the transition to a new *Aeon*, a new age of the world. These seven periods correspond to the Seven Verbs, to the Seven archangelic hypostases emanated during the stupor that immobilised the spiritual Adam, the celestial *Anthrôpos*. These seven periods thus correspond to the ideal distance that he must traverse so that the interval of 'delayed eternity' may be bridged. Transformed by this delay into the Tenth of the Pleroma, the celestial Adam, the Angel of the human race, rises at the end of each cycle a new degree in the reconquest of his initial rank, with the help of all his own, that is to say, of those humans who, like him, have triumphed over their Iblis.

We encounter the number seven once again within the decimal scheme proposed by our authors (Hamîd Kermânî and Idrîs 'Imâdoddîn). There are three higher degrees in the celestial hierarchy and in the earthly hierarchy; there are seven degrees which, in the latter, are degrees of active function (consider here the ten *Sefîrôt* of Jewish Kabbalah: there are three higher *Sefîrôt* and seven *Sefîrôt* of operation). Having noted this, I shall focus solely on the network of rigorous correspondences that characterise the Ismaili world system.

There is a correspondence (homology) between the celestial hierarchy of the ten Intelligences or archangelic hypostases and their respective heavens or universes. There is a correspondence, term for term, between the degrees of the celestial hierarchy and those of the esoteric hierarchy that constitutes the structure of the Ismaili brotherhood. There is a correspondence between this dual hierarchy and the seven manifestations (not incarnations but epiphanies) of *the Verus Propheta*, throughout the seven

periods of our cycle. Finally, there is a correspondence between this triple hierarchy and the succession of the seven Imams or heptads of Imams throughout each period of the cycle.

There is, therefore, a vertical *dimension*— —which constitutes the permanent hierarchy within the eternity of time. And there is a horizontal dimension which constitutes the hierarchical succession within the time of this world.

The great significance of the Ismaili conception (or vision) of these correspondences is that the impermanent order of succession in time is thereby redirected towards the permanent order of simultaneity in spiritual space. *Time* thus *becomes space.* What appeared to be a transitional period becomes a permanent place in pure spiritual space. Moreover, it is necessary for time to become space from the moment one speaks of a distance to be bridged, to be reconquered. The reconquest of the spiritual rank lost by humanity and its Angel is a progressive *ascent*, step by step, through the spiritual space. It is not, therefore, a philosophy of history, but a philosophy of history itself, which is entirely different. It is not a matter of historical evolution, which would only serve to aggravate the 'delay of eternity', the fall into impermanent time. It is a matter of the *involution* of that unstable time into the time of eternity, which is absolute duration, that is to say, absolved of the vicissitudes of historical time. That is the reconquest of delayed eternity, which takes place according to the rhythm of the septenary. The consequences of this vision are incalculable and have not yet been explored. It invites us to think of ourselves no longer in terms of time, as everything leads us to do nowadays, but in terms of space—not empirical space, but the space of the suprasensory worlds and interworlds. It is there that Ismaili gnosis offers us the vision of the Temple of Light of the Imamate, which signifies the soteriological function of imamology as the fulfilment of the prophetic word.

4. Imamology and soteriology

This ascent of the Angel of humanity to the reconquest of his original rank in the Pleroma began with the return of *the Pananthrôpos*, the original Adam, first prophet and first Imam on earth, at the end of his cycle of epiphany. That return signifies his elevation to the Pleroma, where he then occupied the rank of the Tenth Angel, the celestial Adam, whilst the latter was thus elevated to the rank immediately superior to that which had marked the end of his fall. And in his upward movement, which will not cease until he himself (who has become the Tenth from the Third) has regained his rank within the precincts of the Second Intelligence, he also draws along with him the entire pleroma of the archangelic hypostases. Every Imam after him likewise ascends with all his own towards that Angel of humanity who is the spiritual Adam; all remain

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[4] For these correspondences and, in general, for all the topics discussed up to the end of this article, see H. Corbin, 'Divine Epiphany and Spiritual Birth in Ismaili Gnosis', in *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis,* op. cit. (Translator's *note*)

gathered within its precincts, until the Imam of the Great Resurrection is raised, marking the end of a cycle. Then all the Imams of all periods join him, just as each Imam is the support of the forms of light that are the souls of his faithful followers, and which together with him constitute the ‘Temple of Light’ of his Imamate. Likewise, each Imam is a member of the ‘Sublime Temple of Light’ of the last Imam, the Imam of the Great Resurrection.

He is so with all his members, for whom he is the guarantor, and all the Temples of Light of all the Imams together become a single form of light, akin to one of the archangelic Intelligences of the Pleroma.

Each time, the *Qâ'im*, the Imam of the Resurrection, succeeds the Tenth Angel, whose rank he occupies, the latter then rising one degree higher, bringing him closer to his original place. Each Great Resurrection, each advent of a cycle, thus allows the Angel of humanity to draw near, with all his own, to the place he occupied before the 'drama in heaven'. Thus, all cycles and millennia become so many places, worlds and interworlds, which, as they are passed, gradually reduce the 'delay of eternity' caused by the momentary darkening of the celestial Adam. That is why every earthly event, whether it reduces or exacerbates that delay, finds its explanation only in its esoteric reality, that is to say, in relation to the 'drama in Heaven' whose outcome it brings nearer or, conversely, delays. This is the raison d'être of the *da'wat*, the Ismaili "Call", and the meaning of life for all those who have responded to it even before their earthly existence.

We thus see how Ismaili prophetology finds its necessary culmination in imamology, for it is to the latter that the soteriological function belongs. Without imamology, prophetology would be deprived of soteriology, and this is essentially the mystery of the esoteric, the initiation into the hidden meaning of Revelation. This brings us to the radical difference that separates Sunni and Shia Islam, a difference that is not always apparent without sufficient theological knowledge. Now, this soteriological function of Imamology, which we have just seen at work in the ascending movement marking the return to the lost original rank, essentially involves the image of the 'Temple of Light' of the Imamate, which is both the organ and the triumph of soteriology. What ultimately becomes of this Temple of Light, which is a key concept for understanding the Ismaili notion of the Imam?

To understand this, one must perceive the very clear Manichaean echoes implied by the Ismaili concept of the Temple of Light. Our Ismaili texts state that at the moment the neophyte utters the solemn pledge binding him to the Ismaili brotherhood, a form of light is united with his soul, remaining by his side without merging with it—that is, without any confusion of persons—and shining upon it like a jewel. This form of light has as its source the 'Pillar of Light' which, from the Supreme Principle, communicates from Intelligence to Intelligence within the celestial hierarchy.

This echo of the motif of the 'Pillar of Light', one of the dominant themes of Manichaean gnosis, cannot fail to surprise, particularly given the identity of the Ismaili motif with the Manichaean motif of the form of light received by the chosen one when he joins the Manichaean community through the solemn act of renouncing the powers of this world. With a lyricism equal to that of the Manicheans, the Ismaili texts describe the power of this Pillar of Light, whose action, as if possessed of a prodigious magnetism, reaches into the depths of the lowest levels of the esoteric brotherhood to raise them step by step and gather them around the Imam. It will depend on the adept that that form of light grows until it becomes a radiant form

that you will be able to behold at the moment of your departure from this world. That form is the celestial *alter ego*, the personal Angel, the 'image in the likeness of the soul', to which Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism gave the same name of *Daênâ*.

The magnetism of the 'Pillar of Light' draws all forms of light, together with their fellow initiates, so that together they constitute the 'Temple of Light of the Imamate', a purely spiritual Temple, yet one that takes human form, in the sense that each is transferred from level to level within that Temple according to the merit the demiurgic Angel discerns in it, that is, according to what it has acquired in this world. Some are situated in the place of the heart, others in the place of the brain, the eyes, the ears, etc. (Swedenborg). The total Temple of Light is the 'form of resurrection', the Temple of Light of the last Imam, who is the Imam of the Great Resurrection, and it contains the Temples of Light of every Imam, of all the prophets, of all the dignitaries (*hodûd)* and true gnostics who have preceded him throughout the periods of the cycle.

When they say that the Imamate is that Temple of Light, our authors refer us to the Christological model of their Imamology. This faces, in fact, the very same problem as Christology: what is the relationship between the divine nature (the *lâhût*) and the human nature (the *nâsût* of the Imam? Now, the divinity of the Imam, his *lâhût*, is precisely that Temple of Light constituted by all the souls of light, that is to say, by all the levels of the mystical fellowship, and therefore by that 'Pillar of Light' of which the Imamate is the support. As for humanity, his *nâsût*, it is not ordinary humanity. Imamology here tends towards the Monophysite conception. In one way or another, all gnosis, being essentially attentive to events 'in Heaven', that is, in the pleroma, conveys the Presence—not the incarnation but the epiphany—of the supersensible which transfigures all things of the earthly world in terms of *caro spiritualis*. Contrary, then, to the tendencies that have prevailed in the West, and for reasons opposite to those that have determined the orientation of official Christianity.

5. The paracletic horizon of Ismaili prophetology

It is this vision of the Temple of Light of the Imamate that ultimately allows us to speak, as in the case of Twelver Shi'ism, of the paracletic horizon of Ismaili prophetology. Just as those Twelver Shi'ite theologians we have mentioned (Haydar Âmolî and others) identified the Twelfth Imam, the currently hidden Imam, with the Paraclete announced in the Gospel of John, so too did the Ismailis identify the Imam of the Resurrection with the Paraclete. We find traces of this in the great 'Epistle of Recapitulation' which they appended to the famous encyclopaedia of the 'Brothers of Purity' (*Ikhwan al-Safâ)* in the 10th century. Very briefly, we have outlined its consequences: whilst for Sunni Islam the religious history of humanity is concluded with the prophetic mission of Muhammad, who was the Seal of

the prophets, for all of Shi'a Islam—Twelver and Ismaili—the horizon of the future remains open. It is not yet consummated.

We find confirmation of this fact, expressed with explosive intensity, in a very ancient text, a 10th-century Ismaili initiation narrative entitled 'The Sage and the Disciple', which I must briefly refer to in order to conclude our discussion[5].

In it, the dialogue between the Ismaili missionary and the neophyte whom he "summons" reaches moments of great pathos. Everything is conditioned by the affirmation of the esoteric meaning of the revelations, an affirmation upon which Imamology is founded and which opens the paracletic horizon. All the enemies of gnosis, explains the Ismaili missionary, all those who ignore or reject the hidden meaning that is the Spirit and the life of the things of this world, are merely handling a corpse. Those who ignore or reject the esoteric aspect of religion have turned religion into a corpse. Now, one must not touch a corpse, for one cannot do so without becoming impure. The missionary's interlocutor is then forced to admit: "Yes, we cling only to the mere name of religion." The Ismaili then proclaims emphatically: "Religion, which is esoteric divine wisdom, is that which lies beyond the Veil that safeguards it securely against the corrupters. [...] It is the link between Heaven and Earth, a continuous and unbroken link. [...] It is the rope to which those seeking refuge cling. It is the *Ark of the Sakîna."*

Tabût al-Sakîna! The expression is remarkable, for the Arabic *Sakîna* is the equivalent of the Hebrew *Shekhina* (the mysterious divine presence in the Holy of Holies of the temple). Therein lies an Ismaili appeal addressed to all those whom the Qur'an designates as *Ahl al-Kitâb*, the 'People of the Book'. Thus, the Ismailis, in all their books, have conveyed this appeal. Already Abû Ya'qûb Sejestânî, in his *Book of Sources,* explains that the symbol of the Christian Cross contains the same hidden meaning as the four words that make up the *tawhîd*, the Islamic profession of faith, and invites the Ismaili adept to profess the same veneration towards both symbols.

However, in none of the Ismaili texts I have come across is there anything comparable to the unprecedented boldness of the Ismaili missionary in the initiation narrative I am referring to. He reproaches all the 'communities of the Book' (Zoroastrians, Israelites, Christians) for having sought to prevent the manifestation of the True Prophet through their own prophet. Any Muslim might agree with this, but they will no longer do so when our Ismaili continues: 'And you, Muslims, are committed to the path of those who have gone before you. Your community has inherited the Book (the Qur'an) from unworthy people (an allusion to the denial of the Imam since the Prophet's death); it has followed opportunistic leaders; it has placed itself in the service of teachers who lead it astray; it has debased itself before proud doctors of the Law [...] If it is for the Creator to pass judgement on His creations, well then, He abrogates what He pleases and upholds what He wills, without anyone being able to delay His judgement. But then, by my life! It is everyone's claim that

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[5] H. Corbin examines this account in detail in 'The Ismaili Initiation or Esotericism and the Word', *'Man and His Angel',* Destino, Barcelona, 1994, pp. 83–187. (*Translator's note)*

that crumbles, his and yours! God is in a new state every day! (Qur'an 55:29), and it is not for anyone to refute or deny His action, *even if He raises up a prophet every day."*

This tirade, needless to say, is truly explosive. For how can it be reconciled with the Sunni dogma that after Muhammad there will be no more prophets? It seems that its vehemence reveals an origin predating the prudence observed by the Fatimid Imams. In any case, it stands as a testament to the breadth and boldness of the Ismaili faith. To such an extent, if I may say so, that it would suffice to convince us that our two talks have not dealt with exotic curiosities, alien to our world. The content of our Shi'ite and Ismaili treatises gives them, I believe, a contemporary significance, a tragically contemporary one, for it is addressed to all the *Ahl al-Kitâb.*

In keeping with its spirit, I have sought to highlight numerous connections with the prophetic tradition of Judeo-Christianity; for when a Shia theologian engages in dialogue with a Christian theologian, as he does, for example, with the utmost courtesy, in 17th-century Isfahan, Sayyed Ahmad Alavî, a disciple of the great master of theology Mîr Dâmâd, it is always to guide his Christian interlocutor back to a conception of Christianity which, broadly speaking, is that of the so-called Clementine literature and the Gospel of Barnabas. That is why I have sought to highlight the connections between a certain Christology and Imamology, because the latter presupposes the former. In short, Imamology fulfils in Shi'ite theology the function of Christology in Christian theology. Shi'ite theologians have faced the same problems, but have settled on solutions that correspond to those which had been anathematised by the councils. Thus, Twelver Shi'ite imamology would correspond more to a Christology of the Ebionite or Nestorian type. There is something akin to a Shi'ite Nestorianism! But the imamology of the reformed Ismailism of Alamut in the Persian language, as well as Fatimid imamology, tends to recover a Christology of the Monophysite type.

At the same time, we can also understand why the prophetic tradition of *the Verus Propheta* can only reach its conclusion within the paracletic horizon. Undoubtedly, Sunni theologians, for their part, were able to identify the Prophet Muhammad with the Paraclete foretold by Jesus (just as Mani, as the Perfect Illuminator and Supreme Revealer, had been the subject of the same identification by the Manichaeans). But this always amounts to placing the Paraclete-Holy Spirit in the past. And this is what the Shi'ite conscience, illuminated by the expectation of the Imam to come, cannot bear. I pointed out in my previous lecture how the Shi'ite periodisation of the ages of the world harmonised with that which we owe to Joachim of Fiore and the Joachimites, whose influence was so considerable in Western thought.

Unfortunately, I do not have the impression that our theological and philosophical research in the West is keen to pay attention to these connections and these parallels. However, these connections contain something very serious, which led me a moment ago to use the phrase 'tragically topical', and I believe I can say this having spent more than a quarter of a century in Iran, in familiarity with the world spiritual Iranian. We know that our ideologies

are the secularisation and laicisation of earlier theological systems. Islam as a whole could not assimilate those theological systems developed over the centuries by Christian thought. Now, here is the crushing paradox of our times: we may ask ourselves whether, in part and in certain respects, under the weight of Western influence, the Islamic world is not in the process of receiving, in the secularised form of post-Christian ideologies, what it had previously rejected in its earlier theological form. Undoubtedly, very few are yet aware of this paradox, but it is here that the danger of disintegration lies, a danger inherent in any ideology imposed from the outside upon a consciousness that has not produced it itself.

Then, perhaps, the subject of our two conversations will prove suitable for finally enabling a genuine theological and philosophical encounter between the *Ahl al-Kitâb*, even if there were only a handful of people to take on this task.

We are, in fact, faced with a choice: either to face it together, we, all the *Ahl al-Kitâb*, resuming our theological adventure together from the very beginning, so that, instead of separating us, the adventure may this time bring us together; or else we may embark on an exhausting and doomed-to-failure quest to recover ideologies that elude us and which can only exacerbate the 'delay of eternity' of which our Ismaili authors speak.

In the latter case, I fear we would do nothing but definitively prove the truth of Chesterton's famous words: 'The world today is full of Christian ideas … which have gone mad!'

Paris, 21 January 1975.

III

Rûzbehân Baqlî of Shîrâz[1]

Earlier this November, we read in a Tehran evening newspaper that, on the initiative of the Anjoman-e Athâr-e Melli, urgent work had just been carried out to save Shaykh Rûzbehân's shrine, the Arâmâgh, in Shîrâz from complete ruin. Admittedly, we have not gathered here to discuss the evening newspaper, but a brief item such as this may prompt a reflection which I do not believe is marked by excessive pessimism: for how many readers will the memory of Rûzbehân, suddenly brought to the forefront of current affairs, have evoked anything specific? Evidently, for some, especially those with some connection to Sufism. But I believe that our conference this afternoon is the first occasion to celebrate Rûzbehân in a European language. In this sense, I hope that all those who have placed their trust in us by coming here may now count themselves among the ranks of these initiates. It is a wish I express with all the more fervour given that, amongst all the figures representing the spirituality of Iran, the person and work of Rûzbehân are of paramount importance. My colleague and friend, Professor Mo'în, and I have devoted several years' work to restoring a first monument of this body of work. What I shall attempt to convey here will be set out more explicitly in the forthcoming volume of the 'Bibliothèque Iranienne', which contains the Persian work that Rûzbehân titled The *Jasmine of the Believers in Love.*[2]

When it comes to presenting for the first time a biography and a body of work as representative as those of Rûzbehân, we immediately and inevitably face the same difficulties: we lack points of reference. We certainly see how, in our day, symposia are multiplying in a spirit of goodwill to bring East and West closer together; but it seems that, all too often, the essential questions are not explored to their full depth. To delve into them, it would first be necessary for us to grant each other access to the texts in which an impression of the universe, an image of the world, a search for the divine has been expressed; in short, we would have to address those problems of which we are all heirs. Until we have accomplished this task of mutual understanding, we shall confine ourselves to engaging in polite monologues in each other's presence. Moving towards dialogue would be a task for philosophers,

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1 Lecture delivered at the French Institute in Tehran on Thursday 27 November 1958. For further details on Rûzbehân, see H. Corbin, 'Rûzbehân Baqlî et le soufisme des fidèles d'amour', in *En Islam iranien,* op. cit., vol. III, pp. 7–146. *(Translator's note)*

2 This volume has been out of print for years, but the French translation of the text, by H. Corbin, has been published in a new edition: *Le jasmin des Fidèles d'amour,* Verdier, Lagrasse, 1991. *(Translator's note)*

if they were not so often absorbed by conventional programmes, when they are not allowing themselves to be captivated by the fashions of the moment.

Meanwhile, if one wishes to delve deeply into these issues, one comes to be regarded as a ‘specialist’. Indeed, what are we to make of a cultural situation in which the effort devoted to understanding a human experience—one whose example can shape the most personal destiny of each individual—is seen as an interest reserved for ‘specialists’?

The case of Rûzbehân, as it presents itself to us, may shed light on this difficulty. He was born in 522/1128 in Pasâ, a small town situated some 140 kilometres south-east of Shîrâz. His name is distinctly Iranian in sound (it means ‘of happy destiny’, ‘whose day is happy’). It was a name commonly found in the provinces of Tabaristan and Daylam, from where her family originated. And nothing in that family, according to Rûzbehân’s own account, foreshadowed the emergence of a mystical vocation such as hers. He left this world in Shîrâz in 606/1209. His long life spans almost the entirety of that period which in the West we refer to as the 12th century. Well then! If we were to ask a young Western student of philosophy about the 12th century, these two words would conjure up in his mind the image of specific philosophical and spiritual schools. It is to be feared that we would catch him off guard if we asked him what was happening, at that very time, in Iran in terms of the history of philosophy and spirituality. And it might be dangerous to pose the reciprocal question to an Eastern student.

But there is something worse. We succumb to the illusion that we are establishing relationships between contemporaries, or that we are becoming contemporaries of one another, simply by manipulating tables of comparisons between the Islamic era and the Christian era, for example, and by converting the figures for the years arithmetically. Such an operation concerns calendar time, that is to say, physical time—continuous and quantitative, objective and impersonal—the time of the years in which the events we experience ‘fall’. But before ‘falling’ there, our inner being modulates its own time, a purely qualitative time, the time of souls, discontinuous, irreducible to the quantifications of the calendar. The problem is not, then, for each of us to ‘live with our time’, ‘walk with our time’, according to the trivial expression—one that is all the more misleading in that it actually invites us to belong not to our own time, but to the time of everyone else. On that level, it is impossible to establish the synchronicities that underpin all mutual understanding. If, as a man of the 12th century, Rûzbehân seems infinitely distant to us, that means we shall never encounter him. If, on the other hand, his own time is in synchrony with ours, the encounter has already taken place. For this reason, let us not be hasty in transposing the historical qualifications to which we are accustomed into terms of calculation. The term ‘*medieval*’, for example, expresses far less a quantification of time than a certain qualitative time. From that point on, it is not entirely certain that the boundaries within which we are accustomed to placing it have a transferable meaning. It is not entirely certain that we can speak in the same sense of a medieval France, for example, and a medieval Iran, as if it were a mere matter of equivalences established in the physical time of the calendar.

Once these precautions have been taken, the synchronicities that can help us situate Rûzbehân as a person and his work take on a different meaning depending on whether we consider them within his Iranian context or within a context that Rûzbehân himself could not have foreseen. Indeed, a study of comparative mysticism

will find Rûzbehân to be a contemporary of spiritual lineages that extend far beyond the confines of the 12th century.

On the other hand, if one were to come to the aid of a student questioned at random about the *spiritual* events of the 6th century of the Hegira in Iran—those generally indifferent to the grand narrative of political history—I would point out this: great things are taking place or being prepared. In the far eastern reaches of the Iranian world, in Khwârezm, Sufism, under the impetus of the great master Najmoddîn Kubrâ, is taking a direction that is both speculative and experiential, setting it apart profoundly from the pious ascetics who had taken the name of Sufis in the early centuries of Islam. Attentive to the visions of coloured lights that reveal to the mystic their degree of spiritual advancement, relating them respectively to the seven centres or organs of subtle physiology, and each of these to a prophet, Sufism undertakes a radical internalisation based on an extremely [complex] esoteric exegesis of the Qur'an[3].

Faced with the onslaught of the Mongol invasions, the disciples of Najmoddîn Kubrâ turned towards the West. Among them were some of the most prestigious names in Iranian Sufism: Najm Dâyeh Râzî, Sa'doddîn Hamûyeh, 'Azîzoddîn Nasafi, 'Alaoddawleh Semnânî, and so on.

We follow them progressively westwards. In Nishâpur, we find the great poet Farîdoddîn 'Attâr composing his magnificent mystical epics. Further still to the west, between Qazvin and the Caspian Sea, in the fortress of Alamut, on 8 August 1164 the Great Resurrection is proclaimed—the event of pure spiritual Islam through which Iranian Ismailism henceforth takes on the character of a religion of personal salvation and spiritual resurrection. Finally, it was in this very century of the Hegira that a young, enthusiastic and daring philosopher, Shihaboddîn Yahyâ Sohravardî, dared to undertake a great task: to restore the wisdom of ancient Iran, the ancient doctrine of Light and Darkness, within the context of the philosophical and theological problems arising from Islamic sources and the legacy of Greek philosophy in Islam. Although the vengeance of the doctors of the Law led to his martyr's death in Aleppo, in the prime of his youth, at the age of thirty-six, in 587/1191, his work left an indelible mark on the entire future of Iranian philosophy. The work of Shaykh al-Ishrâq established a new form of Avicennism; its influence can be seen throughout the school of Isfahan during the Safavid era, in Mîr Dâmâd, Mollâ Sadrâ and, closer to our own time, in the last century, in Hâdî Sabzavârî. And whilst the young master, a bold reviver within Islam of the theosophy of ancient Iran, had barely time to be born and live out his all too brief life, Shaykh Rûzbehân continued his long spiritual career in southern Iran, in Shîrâz.

2. Rûzbehân in Shîrâz

To trace the course of that life, and above all to witness the emergence of its early fruits, we have an exceptional document at our disposal. In a work entitled *Kashf al-asrâr (The Unveiling of Secrets),* Rûzbehân left us his own *spiritual diary*, recounting his mystical stages and visionary experiences. Fortunately, two of his manuscripts have survived to the present day.

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[3] Corbin would study this subject extensively years later. See *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism,* Siruela, Madrid, 2000. *(Translator's note)*

Such documents are rare; one might mention here a similar work by Nâjm Kûbrâ, certain mystical accounts by Sohravardî, or the ecstatic confessions of Mîr Dâmâd. In the West, a point of comparison might be found in the **Diarium spirituale** by the great visionary mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg. Such texts, which are sources of inestimable value for the phenomenology of mysticism, do not in any way authorise us to speak of schizophrenia; far from it, what distinguishes the authentic mystic, amongst other things, is the consciousness that differentiates with perfect lucidity between the events experienced by him in the intermediate state and those that form part of the fabric of everyday normality.

The writing of this work, so rich in themes of meditation and ecstasy, was prompted by a request from a friend who had asked Rûzbehân about his early spiritual life. 'I was fifteen years old,' he writes in reply to that friend at the beginning of the book, 'when the first stirrings of those mysterious things arose in my heart. I am now forty-five. How, my friend, can I now recover what escapes you, namely the secrets of my mystical revelations and the subtle conditions in which I lived through my visionary experiences? Nevertheless, I shall recall for you some things that were revealed to me in the days of my past." Rûzbehân then gathers his distant memories: "I was born amongst the ignorant, amongst people who were victims of unconsciousness and error, coarse and vulgar, like donkeys fleeing in fear before a lion (Qur'an 74:51). I was three years old when this question arose in my heart: where is your God and the God of all creatures? It so happened that we had a mosque next to our house. One day, I saw some young people there and asked them: Do you know your God? They replied: it is said that He has neither feet nor hands. Indeed, I had heard their parents say that the Most High God is devoid of limbs and organs. But having asked this question, I was suddenly overcome with emotion and began to run. Something akin to the flashes of remembrance and the sudden glimpses that open up in meditation happened to me, but, of course, at the time I could not truly understand what was happening. I turned seven. Then my heart became attached to the practice of *dhikr*, that is, the repeated recitation of a meditation formula freely chosen or transmitted by a shaykh. I set out in search of my secret (*sirr)* and undertook its study.

Sirr, 'secret': this is one of the characteristic terms of Sufi psychology; it designates the most subtle organ. We can translate it, more or less accurately, as 'subliminal consciousness', or, better still, as 'transconsciousness'. In reality, when the word is uttered, the Sufi thinks of what is the soul of the soul (*jân-e jân)*, the 'inner beloved' (*mashûq-e bâtin),* which is in fact his most personal secret, the *qibla*, the centre of orientation for his most intimate desires.

"Later," continues Rûzbehân, "the love of ardent desire (*'ishq*) was born in her heart, and she felt her heart melting into this love. All that time I spent in deep longing, for my heart then sank into the ocean of the memory of my eternal pre-existence and into the scent of the perfumes of the heavenly world. Later, sudden flashes of fleeting ecstasy arose within me, without any physical sensation, though a certain sweetness filled my heart, whilst tears streamed from my eyes. I did not understand what was happening to me; I perceived nothing but my remembrance of God in the present moment."

Step by step, between the ages of twelve and fifteen, we can follow the progress of the young boy destined to become a great Sufi shaykh. A trait emerges, already characteristic of a spirituality that perceives in the mystery of beauty the theophany (*tajallî)* par excellence: "At that time," writes Rûzbehân, "I saw all beings as transfigured into beautiful faces, and as they appeared to me in this way, their beauty inspired in me a taste for meditative retreats, intimate supplications (*monâjât),* devotional practices, and visits to the most eminent shrines of the Sufi shaykhs." Moreover, at the dawn of adolescence, at the age of fifteen, a series of decisive events takes place, such as the personal spiritual initiation that Rûzbehân owes to no teacher of this world. The aspiration characteristic of Sufism appears in his consciousness: to verify, through a personal mystical experience, the testimony of the prophetic experience. An inner voice suggests to the adolescent that he is a prophet *nabî* (not, certainly, a *nabî morsal*, a sent prophet, and even less so one sent with a Book, but simply a *nabî*). He declares himself unfit: the state of *nabî* is incompatible, he thinks, with the imperfections inherent in a body of flesh. The inner event that will determine his entire life is already being foreshadowed. Let us observe this closely: the young Rûzbehân is still unaware of all the theological difficulties that have accumulated around *tawhîd*, the profession of faith that articulates Islam's monotheistic conception. He would still be incapable of articulating the difference between exoteric *tawhîd*—monotheism as understood by the official, legalistic religion—and esoteric *tawhîd*—'theomonism' as experimentally grasped by the theosophy of Sufism. And yet, having already found the path to his personal secret, the soul of his soul, the decisive experience will present itself as a first encounter with this formidable problem.

One evening, after supper, he left his home and made his way to a certain spot in the desert surrounding Shiraz, intending to perform his ablutions for prayer there. "Suddenly," he writes, "I heard the sound of a sweet voice. My innermost self (*sirr)* and my ardent longing (*shawq)* were startled. I cried out: 'Hey! O man of the voice, wait for me!' I climbed a nearby hill and found myself in the presence of a figure of great beauty, resembling the appearance of the Sufi shaykhs. I was unable to say anything. He himself uttered a few words concerning *tawhîd.* I did not understand, but I simultaneously experienced great anguish and a senseless love." The young man remained like this for part of the night in the desert, beside himself. He then returned home, where he remained "until morning," he says, "gripped by emotion and restlessness, with sighs and tears. [...] Afterwards, I calmed down. It seemed to me that this had lasted for hours and hours." He remained seated for another hour, meditating. Then, yielding to the violence of his emotion, he rises, packs up all his belongings, which he throws into a corner, and goes out into the desert. "I remained in that state," he writes, "for a year and a half, nostalgic, dumbfounded, transported by emotion. Every day was marked by grandiose visions of ecstasy and by sudden visitations from the invisible worlds. In the course of those visions, the heavens and the earth, the deserts and the plants, everything appeared to me as pure light. Then, I found a certain calm."

These "divine touches" that have accompanied him since childhood, that visionary ability to transform beings and things into faces of beauty, that emotional capacity that goes

far the limits known to conventional psychology—everything that shapes the person of Rûzbehân is already present in the adolescent.

In the course of a vision in which the entire universe appears to him as a resplendent, overflowing, immense light, he hears from the centre of that light a divine voice calling him seven times in Persian: “O Rûzbehân! I have chosen you to be an Initiate, a ‘Friend’ (*walâyat)*, I have chosen you for love, you are my Friend. Do not give in to fear, do not give in to sadness, for I am your God and I watch over you in all that you undertake.” A remarkable sequence, then: as if to suggest that the Sufi notion of spiritual initiation (*walâyat)* must be what it is in the guiding and fundamental thought of Shi’ism, behold, this mention finds its continuation in another vision where the name of the First Imam, Alî ibn Abî-Tâlib, is pronounced. “On that occasion,” writes Rûzbehân, “it seemed to me in my vision that I was on the mountain of the East, and there was a group of angels there. From East to West lay an immense sea; I could see nothing else. Then the angels said to me: ‘Enter the sea and swim towards the West.’ I entered the sea and began to swim. When I reached the west of the Sun, at the hour of its setting [...] I saw a group of angels on the mountain of the West. They were resplendent in the glow of the setting sun. They called out to me: ‘Swim on, do not be afraid.’ When I finally reached the mountain, amongst them, they said to me: ‘No one had crossed this sea before you, apart from Alî ibn Abî-Tâlib.’

When we consider the early links and fundamental connections between Sufism and Shi’ism, we must never lose sight of the implicit significance of this account. At the same time, we may also learn something about the identity of the mysterious figure whose beautiful appearance at dusk, in the hollow of a hill in the desert near Shîrâz, caused the young Rûzbehân to experience a decisive awakening. This perilous journey towards the West of the Sun, to the far reaches of the region of Darkness, reminds us of something: one of those archetypal tales of which Rûzbehân’s experience must in turn be regarded as a remarkable illustration. Undoubtedly, the Imam’s evocation suggests to us the soul’s progress as it penetrates the night of the esoteric meaning of the Revelations (the *bâtin-e nobowwat)* to find there the light of its resurrection. But there is, as if superimposed, the theme of the Quest for the Source of Life, the Water of immortality, which is found by those who have the courage to face the Darkness—a quest whose legendary figures are Alexander, who goes astray, and Khezr, who attains it. Khezr (Khadir)! The mysterious prophet who is as often paired with the prophet Elijah as he is identified with him, and who, in some Shi’a traditions, is also identified with the ‘Hidden Imam’. Superior to the law-giving prophets (he is even the initiator of Moses, Sura 18), his role in Sufism is of the utmost importance; from century to century, his presence shines through from the world of the Mystery; he is the personal master of all those who have no initiator or earthly teachers. A disciple of Khidr, such as Rûzbehân, such as Ibn ‘Arabî, such as so many others, is a Sufi who, prior to any contact with a human master, prior to any earthly historical lineage passed down through successive human generations, receives his direct lineage from the one whom all those who have had no human master have recognised as their sole master. This lineage, this initiation by Khezr, thus has a *transhistorical* significance, and through it mystical religion escapes all possible socialisation; it is an

event that takes place, as an absolute beginning, in pure psycho-spiritual time, the time in which we see the young Rûzbehân living his initiatory experience in a visionary state.

Everything suggests that Rûzbehân recognises the mysterious figure who had first stirred his emotions regarding *tawhîd* in the person of Khezr, whom he later encounters.

Still in his adolescence, at a time, he tells us, when he was still ignorant of the higher theosophical sciences, he encounters Khezr in the course of one of his visions. Khezr gives him an apple, saying: 'Eat it whole, for that is the amount I have eaten'. The symbolism is clear: Rûzbehân must, through initiation, become what Khezr himself is. "And it seemed to me," he says, "that from the Throne to the Pleiades there was an immense sea; I could see nothing else. It was like the radiance of the Sun. Then my mouth opened against my will, and into it entered the entire contents of that sea of light; not a single drop of it remained that I had not absorbed." Khezr's arrival at the Fountain of Life is faithfully exemplified here in the case of his disciple, who experiences it as the absorption of a Water of light. Through this initiation, Rûzbehân attains the "Khezr of his being". There is an essential link between the idea of the personal spiritual master, the figure of Khezr, and the idea of the Celestial Twin, the *Spritus rector* (in Manichaeism), the "Witness in Heaven" of whom Najmoddî Kubrâ speaks, the transcendent spiritual Self, our "second-person" self, that which is to be understood in the famous saying: "He who knows himself knows his Lord."

To put that phrase into practice is, in effect, this: to be a disciple of Khezr, to attain the 'Khezr of your being', the 'soul of your soul'. Another insight with which we shall conclude our brief exploration of Rûzbehân's spiritual initiation will confirm this: two figures will welcome him, and he will feel that they are himself in his own image and likeness. But there is more. Having reached that stage of initiation, Rûzbehân will become one of the seven *Abdâl.* This is another technical term; it refers to a group of people who form the pinnacle of an invisible mystical hierarchy, determined solely by the spiritual state of its members, and which assumes a fundamental role in Sufi esotericism. This esoteric hierarchy comprises a specific number of people (360, for example, corresponding to the 360 degrees of the Sphere, though there are many variations and expansions), who succeed one another in assuming the same tutelary role and who constitute a plane of historical permanence; they are distributed both in the interworlds and in our earthly world, invisibly, and are known, exceptionally, only to a small number. At their centre is the Perfect Sage, the 'Pole of Poles' (in Shi'ite terms, the 'Hidden Imam'). A treatise by Rûzbehân will soon teach us what the theosophers of Sufism mean when they assert that if these persons and the Pole of Poles were to cease to exist—which is impossible—our entire world would plunge into a definitive catastrophe. In short, the concept of this mystical hierarchy, as well as its composition, relates both to Shi'ite imamology and to a very ancient astronomical symbolism—that is, an *Imago mundi* of which the astral world and the spiritual world are two homologous manifestations. This is what the exemplary vision will teach us, in the course of which Rûzbehân feels himself elevated to the rank of the *Abdâl.*

An exemplary vision, for in it we find all the archetypal themes one might expect. There is, first of all, a rite of inner ascent, a symbol familiar to all initiation rituals. All creatures are revealed to Rûzbehân, gathered in a house. However, there is a wall and he cannot reach them. He then climbs onto the terrace of his own house and there sees, in the guise of his own person (a significant feature of initiation into self-awareness), two very beautiful shaykhs who smile at him and who, by their appearance, seem to be Sufis. He observes a hanging cauldron, beneath which burns a subtle and pure fire, without smoke, fuelled by fragrant herbs.

One of the two shaykhs takes a tablecloth and unfolds it; some loaves of pure wheat bread and a gracefully shaped bowl appear. He breaks one of the loaves into the bowl, and then pours the contents of the pot into it: 'It was,' says our mystic, 'like a kind of oil, but very subtle, of a completely spiritual nature.' Afterwards, the three of them together partake of a kind of communal meal.

This initiation ceremony, experienced in a visionary state, thus heralds events that are perfectly *real,* yet take place on a plane of *reality* distinct from physical and historical reality. And the scene concludes by revealing to Rûzbehân that he now belongs to that mystical hierarchy whose structure corresponds to the celestial configurations. One of the two shaykhs asks him: 'Do you know what was in the pot?' No, he does not know. 'It was,' says the shaykh, 'oil from the Great Bear that we had gathered for you.' 'When I emerged from my vision,' declares Rûzbehân, 'I pondered these words, but it was not until some time had passed that I realised he was alluding to the seven 'poles' (*aqtâb)* of the celestial pleroma (*Malakût),* and that God had granted me the pure substance of his mystical rank, namely, the rank of the Seven who are invisibly scattered across the face of the earth." Then Rûzbehân took to the habit of contemplating the seven stars of the constellation every night; they appear to him as seven orifices, the 'seven orifices of the Throne', and 'behold, one night,' he says, 'I saw that they were open, and I saw God, who manifested Himself to me through those orifices. "My God!" I cried, "what is this?" And He who transcends all understanding said to me: 'I reveal myself to you through these openings; they form seven thousand thresholds leading to the threshold of the sublime angelic pleroma (*Malakût).* And behold, I reveal myself to you through all of them at once.'

One would have to meditate attentively on the hundreds of visions commemorated in this *Diarium spirituale* to penetrate the secret of his passionate love for beauty, of his ecstatic adoration before the faces of beauty, for he has already beheld those faces in another world: they are the mirrors in which the pre-eternal Beauty is revealed to him. In this secret lies the origin of his sense of the amphiboly (*iltibâs)* of the visible, the multiplication of symbols which he deciphers without ever falling into the trap. He lives in daily contact with the celestial world, in an intimacy that reveals to him its sumptuous splendours, the magnificence of beings of sweetness that remain invisible to ordinary perception: angels adorned with a beauty that is at once tender and superhuman, prophets, houris, gardens and celestial music, a world of such beauty that our imagination can scarcely conceive it. And, as a dominant theme, the repeated splendours of crimson dawns, the profusion of rose gardens, white roses and red roses, the shade of

rose-beds, the divine Presence shining forth in the radiance of a red rose. The opaque partition, the wall of doubt that stands between ordinary men and the hereafter, between the earthly world and the world of the Angel, is clarified for Rûzbehân until it becomes perfectly transparent. Two figures, for example, generally haunt the devout believer: Nâkir and Monkir, the two angels who are to come and fetch him and question him at the grave. But behold, in the course of one of his visions, Rûzbehân sees, in a clear foreshadowing, Nâkir and Monkir as two young men, beautiful and graceful musicians, playing the rebec at the head of his own grave, and they say to him: ‘We are in love with you. ‘In this way we shall come to fetch you at the grave.’ ‘Then,’ says Rûzbehân, ‘all fear vanished from me.’

From this point onwards, he is endowed with a complete spiritual initiation that he owes to no human teacher. He can then set out in search of his spiritual family on earth. He feels increasingly drawn to the company of the Sufis. From Shiraz, when he is around twenty years old, he returns to Pasâ, his native land; there he meets the man who was to become his first shaykh, his first human guide. He then set about acquiring a proper education in the traditional sciences, and those works whose manuscripts have come down to us bear witness to the fact that he had by no means neglected the cycle of theological studies. Subsequently, he undertook the long journeys that are typically part of a Sufi's training: to Kerman (south-east Iran), to Iraq, and to the Hijaz, his stay in Mecca being marked by a memorable event. Despite the detailed biography written by his great-grandson, it is difficult to establish a precise chronology. Moreover, what is of fundamental interest to us is his permanent settlement in Shiraz. Emerging from the great spiritual upheaval of his youth, he had wished to live in a *khângâh* (the term for a Sufi 'lodging' or 'priory'); he went from one to another. This desire could only be fully satisfied by the foundation of his own *khângâh*. He had it built in Shîrâz near the Khadâsh ibn Mansûr gate, in the year 560 of the Hegira (1164/1165), the same year that Ibn 'Arabî, one of the greatest mystical theosophers of all time, was born in Murcia, and on the anniversary of the proclamation of the Great Resurrection of Alamut a year earlier. There are extraordinary synchronicities.

For more than four generations, Rûzbehân's *khângâh* was to be a focal point of spiritual life for Shîrâz, a centre of Sufism of considerable importance. Large numbers of disciples from all regions flocked there. For this reason, the best way for us to follow the life and teachings of Rûzbehân of Shîrâz is to read his books. We have no shortage of testimonies from friends and direct disciples that reveal certain aspects of his outward appearance. One of them, for example, tells us that the face of this mystical lover was of extreme beauty, such that merely looking at him was enough to feel soothed and comforted. "On his luminous forehead," we are told, "appeared the mark of divine intimacy, and the inner radiance of his person became visible in that reflection." From this perspective, the full meaning of an anecdote that all biographers have repeated one after another is also revealed to us. The first time Shaykh Rûzbehân was about to ascend the pulpit to fulfil the role of preaching that he had undertaken for many years in Shîrâz, he heard a mother giving this advice to her daughter: "My daughter, put on your veil; do not show your beauty to anyone, lest it become an object of contempt." Then Shaykh Rûzbehân paused and said: "O woman! Beauty cannot bear to be imprisoned in solitude; its sole desire is that love should unite with it, for in pre-eternity, beauty and love exchanged an oath never to be parted."

It is only natural that such an emotional soul should also have been a musician and should have taken a positive view of the practice of spiritual concert (*samâ'*), which, as we know, many other Sufis regarded with suspicion. Rûzbehân remained a fervent devotee until the very end of his life. But from a certain point onwards, he no longer needed the mediation of audible sounds; he perceived the inaudible in a pure inner music. That is the reason he gave to a friend who

asked about the reasons for his abstention: “From now on,” he said, “God Himself is the oratory I hear; I abstain from listening to any other concert save Him.”

It was to be expected that when Rûzbehân, a nostalgic soul without consolation in his exile, reached the moment of returning 'home', his final words would resonate with unforeseen echoes. Towards the end of his life, he was struck by a form of hemiplegia. Far from inspiring him to seek a remedy, the illness seemed to awaken in him no desire other than to render it incurable. One of his disciples, without telling him, travelled from Shîrâz to Cairo and obtained from the royal treasury a certain quantity of balm intended to cure the Shaykh. On his return to Shîrâz, he was received with these words: "My son, may God reward your good intention. But now, go to the gate of the *khângâh*. There lies a poor mangy dog; rub that balm on him, perhaps it will do him good. But know that no balm in this world can ease Rûzbehân's suffering. It is a chain from among the chains of love that God has firmly fastened to his feet, and it will remain with him until the moment when the joy of reunion arrives."

Two friends come to see him on the very eve of his departure: his brother-in-law, Shaykh 'Alî Sirâj, and Shaykh Abû'l-Hasan Kardûyeh, who was to recite the funeral prayers two days later. With the simplicity and confident certainty afforded by a lifetime of intimacy, Rûzbehân says to them: "Yes, come then. Let us together break free from the bonds of this fleeting bodily existence and enter together into the spiritual, eternal and imperishable existence." The two friends accepted the pact. "Good!" said Rûzbehân to them, "I am the guide who goes before you. You, O 'Alî, shall follow me within a month, and you, Abû'l-Hasan, fifteen days after my departure."

So it came to pass; Shaykh Rûzbehân died the following day, 15 Moharran 606 (1209); his two friends joined him, true to their word, within the timeframes he had indicated.

The shaykh was buried in a plot adjacent to his *khângâh*, where several of his descendants were later to be laid to rest beside him. And here, to conclude this biographical sketch, is another example of a strange friendship that forges a link between this life and the hereafter. The account of a posthumous recitation that has been passed down to us may, for us, correspond to phenomena of interest to parapsychology; this in no way invalidates the testimony of the event *as* it *actually* occurred. A friend and disciple, Shaykh Abû Bakr ibn Tâher Hâfez, was particularly inconsolable at Rûzbehân's passing. He himself recounts it to us: "Every morning, at dawn, Shaykh Rûzbehân and I would take turns reciting the Qur'an; he would recite a tenet of verses, and I the next ten. When he left, I felt distressed and gripped by sadness. At the end of the night, I would rise and perform the prayer. Afterwards, I would go and sit at the head of his grave, and there I would begin reciting the Qur'an, whilst my tears flowed, due to the anguish I felt at being left alone, separated from him. Now, it happened that one morning I suddenly heard the shaykh's voice; it seemed to me that it was coming from the grave and reciting with me, in alternating tenets, the verses of the Book. This continued until the hour when the companions gathered; then the voice ceased. But the same thing happened again on the following days, and it went on like that for some time. But one day I confided this to a friend; from then on, I never heard the voice again."

For our part, we may perhaps hear another voice today: that of reproach. What has become of Rûzbehân's sanctuary over the centuries? For four generations,

the shaykhs of his family, right up to Rûzbehân III, continued to make their *khângâh* the spiritual centre of Shìrâz. One of them carried out considerable extensions; disciples continued to flock there.

Without even dwelling on the spread of the Rûzbehânî order (*tarîqat rûzbehâniya*) outside Iran, let us mention that thanks to a commentator on Hâfez, Sûdî, we know that the great mystical poet of Shîrâz was connected, through one of his shaykhs—whom he refers to as *Pîr-e Golrang*—to that Rûzbehânî order, via a lineage leading back to Rûzbehân's own son. It is therefore not only because of their shared mysticism of love and their Malamite boldness, but also because of a specific lineage, that we establish the link between the two great spiritual figures, Rûzbehân and Hâfez. In the 8th century of the Hegira (14th century), we know from the triple testimony of Jonayd Shîrâzî, Ibn Battûta and Hamdollah Mostawfî that Rûzbehân's shrine was then one of the most renowned in Shîrâz. Every Wednesday, sermons were held there, accompanied by special devotions.

By the 13th century of the Hijri calendar (19th century), the situation had deteriorated completely. Iranian writers sounded the alarm. Mirzâ Hosayni Fasâ'î (a compatriot of Rûzbehân) in his *Fârs-Nâmeh* and Forsat-e Shîrâzî in his *'Athâr-e 'Ajam*, do not hide their indignation: the sanctuary has been abandoned; squatters have even set up a stable there; stones and bricks are being stolen on the sly. The devout and holy Sufi Ma'sûm 'Alî Shâh goes there on pilgrimage, and in his great book on Sufism, having lamented the sad situation, writes: "May God help those whose generosity can make it possible to restore this building!" Thus, one undoubtedly understands the importance of the news to which I referred at the beginning of this talk. But we continue to ask ourselves: is that enough? Are emergency repairs sufficient to honour 'in the present' the person and the memory of the man who was a precursor to Hâfez in Shîrâz? Just as in the time of Ibn Battûta the pilgrim would spontaneously make his way to the shrine of Rûzbehân, it is necessary that the cultured traveller of our day should be able to find his way, not only to the memorial of Hâfez, to the memorial of Sa'di, to the Khân Madrasa, where the great philosopher Mollâ Sadrâ taught in the 17th century, but also to others whose memory might bring back to life the city of Shîrâz, which was so rich in great spiritual figures.

3. "A world that God does not look upon"

We have just referred to how Rûzbehân rejected the efficacy of any earthly remedy for a suffering that could only be abolished by severing the ties of earthly life. The secret to which he alludes is none other than that which has been experienced, to varying degrees of intensity, by all Sufis. It is a situation in which one experiences the very drama of divine love being realised in the experience of human love, for God's revelation of Himself in love passes through and is realised precisely through the tribulations and exultations of human love, since in essence it is nothing other than one and the same love.

In a small book of extraordinary depth, The *Book of Veiling*, Rûzbehân offers a highly personal interpretation of a *hadîth* that has been tirelessly contemplated by the speculative theosophy of Sufism, for it expresses in the finest way the cosmogony, the perception of the universe. Certainly, we do not find there a 'history' recounting events that have occurred and

recorded in the controllable materiality of historical data; but we do find the symbolic story, the eternal event through which human consciousness represents its relationship with the Divine Being.

It is the *hadith* in which the Divine Being, speaking in the first person, affirms: “I was a hidden Treasure; I longed to be known; so I created creation in order to know Myself in it.” At the initial and initiatory threshold of creation, what is revealed is not a flash of omnipotence, but the divine longing and sadness that yearns to emerge from its solitude.

The first figure established by this divine, creative longing is the Holy Spirit, the supreme Spirit, through whom and from whom all Holy Spirits exist; that is to say, the spiritual individualities pre-existing the earthly condition, those of the beings who constitute the ‘spiritual posterity of the sacrosanct Light’. Every atom of being differentiated within this entirely subtle mass of the primordial Spirit is a theophany manifesting a divine attribute, as in an ecstasy of the divinity’s love for itself. That is why each one is an *eye* born of the Light and is completely absorbed in the contemplation of that Light which gives it origin. But God, in revealing Himself (we might say, ‘in objectifying Himself’), has a Witness who contemplates Him, a Witness whom He has externalised, another distinct from Himself. Thus, in pre-eternity, divine jealousy arises regarding Himself, so that God seeks to reclaim Himself in that Other. That is why He turns His gaze away from that creature of His so that it may cease to contemplate Him; He induces it to contemplate itself, and to forget Him. “Then she contemplated herself, was concealed, withdrew (*ghâbat)* from the contemplation of the original Being, of *her* original Being.”

It is this concealment, this act of referring the creature back to itself, which Rûzbehân—analysing it with the insight of the greatest masters of Sufism—designates as the supreme test, the Test of the Veil. On every plane of being—angels, prophets, friends of God, earthly pilgrims—the drama re-emerges. One emerges victorious from it only on condition of experimentally resolving the paradoxical meaning of the famous maxim of Sufism: ‘He who knows himself knows his God’. Only then does the divine jealousy of love cease, for, if it is true that God eternally (that is, now) wishes to be known by a witness (*shâhid)*, that witness can be none other than himself. Therefore, it is necessary that the knowledge the witness has of him be no different from the knowledge he himself has of the witness. It is necessary that the witness’s gaze, following the example of the Prophet at the moment of his supreme vision, “neither stray nor overstep its bounds” (53:17). It is necessary that the witness realise that if he is the witness of God, it is because he himself is the *mirror*, the *eye*, through which God contemplates himself. Since only God can know God, and since only God can bear witness to God, the contemplator (*shâhid)* becomes the contemplated (*mashhûd)*, the lover becomes the beloved. Because of this transfer to the real subject of the contemplative and testimonial activity, it can no longer be said that God is looked upon by the creature; rather, the creature, brought to a state of pure transparency by the disappearance of its selfish self, is God himself looking upon himself in and through his gaze. For creation, as divine contemplation, is not an *object* distinct from the very act of contemplation, but is the organ, the mirror, the *eye;* for without the organ of sight, nothing is revealed. When

the Veil becomes a mirror, then the test is overcome. But Rûzbehân knows this too: ordinary men are unaware of it, and the drama of the human condition lies there, in that unawareness.

What Rûzbehân also knows is that in his person, as in all Sufism, two conceptions of *tawhîd*—of the affirmation of the One—clash, and he devotes himself to explaining this at length in another of his treatises (*Risâla-ye qodsîya).* There is exoteric *tawhîd*, that of common, literal and legalistic religion, for which the affirmation of the One consists in asserting the existence of an *Ens supremum* that transcends the totality of being and of all that exists. But how could there still be a being outside this *Ens supremum?* It would have to be that Other by whom God Himself cannot be seen, since He Himself cannot see Him. And there is esoteric *tawhîd*, that of the elite of the Friends of God, who have become aware that the One whom they bear witness to is, according to the Neoplatonic formula, the unity of love, the lover and the beloved. Through this redemptive path of pure love, the consciousness of the faithful becomes that of the mystic who knows himself as the gaze with which God contemplates Himself, as being himself, in his being, the testimony by which He testifies to Himself, the revelation by which the hidden Treasure reveals itself. The conflict between the One and the Many then ceases, since all creation is a theophany; yet this theophany can be perceived only by that one whose gaze is that gaze of God contemplating Himself in His own gaze.

The consequences of this are infinite in scope. Exoteric *tawhîd*, which is that of abstract monotheism (that is to say, such that *tawhîd* is not realised in the Divine Being itself, since the creature, in bearing witness to it, is extrinsic to it, rather than being its organ), is always in imminent danger of falling into the very worst metaphysical idolatry it seeks to avoid. For if God is known and witnessed by *another* than Himself, then there must be an Other. Now, for there to be an Other, that opacity is necessary—that darkness of a being that remains within itself, in the non-being of its pretensions, of its ignorances, and even of its devotions. If he presents himself as the Other, he cannot look upon God, since God can be looked upon only by himself. God can look upon nothing but a world that is his own gaze, that is to say, his own eyes that look upon him in this world. That is why the world that wishes to *be other* (whether through agnosticism or devotion) is not a world that God looks upon. It is literally *a world that God does not look upon.* Here, the turn of phrase that Rûzbehân literally translates takes on a resonance of singular breadth. For *a world that God does not look* upon is necessary so that Nietzsche's tragic exclamation from the last century may resound and spread within it: *God is dead.* What that cry uttered from the West—and which has since resonated in every conscience—means is the very same thing that the Sufi experiences as the supreme trial, the *trial of the Veil;* and in confronting this trial, Sufism opens precisely the path for those who wish to emerge from it victorious. If its metaphysics is regarded as monism or pantheism by the pious scholars against whom it must precisely seek the path to salvation, such labels are but academic trifles in the face of what is at stake.

We can then glimpse the experiential meaning of the vision in which the adolescent Rûzbehân was given to sense, and then understand, that he belonged to the mystical hierarchy of those known as the *Awlîyâ*, the Friends of God, the 360 (sometimes 12,000) people present at every moment of every cycle of prophecy. These are simultaneously the focal points of the divine Gaze amongst mortals, and the *eyes* through which God contemplates His

creation, or, rather, contemplates Himself in it. They are simultaneously the *eyes* through which God reveals Himself to His creatures and the *eyes* through which He contemplates them, for they are like so many mirrors upon which the sun's rays fall to be reflected in the world.

Through them, other eyes will open to the Gaze, of which they will then also become a part. At the heart of Rûzbehân's teaching we find the same essential insight as that expressed by one of the greatest mystics of the West, Meister Eckhart, in the 14th century, in this statement: 'The gaze through which I know God is the same gaze through which God knows me'. The identity of this mutual, reciprocally conditioned gaze is the secret of the theophanies that filled Rûzbehân's life: his enchantment, his ecstatic love for all forms of beauty, can only be understood in the light of that Gaze. For the multitude of all beauties is nothing other than the multitude of the theophanies of the One, since each one is, at every moment, a gaze through which the One contemplates Himself, revealing Himself to the gaze of the one who contemplates Him. That is why we too can understand what the theosophers of Sufism, Rûzbehân in particular, mean when they repeat that without the pleroma of those beings ignored by the masses of men, without the Pole of Poles (in Shi'ite terms, the Hidden Imam), our world could not endure and would plunge into the ultimate catastrophe. For these elite beings, known as the *Awlîyâ*, the Friends of God, are each a gaze through which God, contemplating Himself, looks upon the world, at every moment of night and day. Therein lies an idea that infinitely surpasses what our age might accept as the 'social' role of the spiritual. What is at stake here is a function of cosmic salvation. It is because their eyes, their gazes, do not close that our world remains *a world upon which God looks.*

Undoubtedly, Rûzbehân is not one of those who can attain a definitive stillness; victory over doubt, over the trial of the Veil, must be won anew each day. Like all the masters of Sufism, he discerned clearly how the pretensions of the deniers ultimately merge with those of the affirmers who, in their legalistic piety, do not divest themselves of their own selves. He concludes his *Book of Obscuration* with this exclamation: "Oh! Poor boy is he who sees the moon on the mountain's peak and imagines that once he has climbed to its summit he will be able to grasp the moon. How can he grasp it if the Moon lies beyond the mountain of Qâf (the cosmic mountain)? [...] I have beheld the new Moon of Unity, but an eternal jealousy prevented me, through a cloud, from reaching it. So I remained in the middle, between separation and reunion, and there is for me no place to flee to nor a refuge in which to weep. [...] I have written this book under the dictation of a battered conscience and a wounded heart; I have sealed it with the inspirations that the trial has inspired in me, in the presence of the Merciful." For Rûzbehân's entire life was spent oscillating between what he called the 'madness of the inaccessible'—the torment of absence, of that which lies eternally beyond, tasted in the moment of encounter—and the healing recovery found in the certainty of love's 'theophanic function', which confers upon the beloved a pre-eternal investiture.

We have just referred to the two opposing forms of *tawhîd;* for initiatory theosophy, they undoubtedly represent two states, two degrees of spiritual progress. Yet a Sufi never ceases to face, in his daily life, the demands of religious law. He too must navigate the two abysses which have, from the very beginning, constituted the nightmare of theology in

Islam: the *tashbîh*, which is to liken God to created attributes, and the *ta'tîl*, which, in order to preserve His transcendence, reduces it to an abstraction. Between the two lies the assertion through which the solidarity of Sufism and Shi'ite Imamology must be recognised: the affirmation of divine revelation, undoubtedly, but one that takes place in the celestial realm (*Malakût)*, and is therefore very different from the Western idea of incarnation with all its implications—an idea that Sufi authors, Rûzbehân among others, vigorously reject.

For theophany is like the manifestation of an image in a mirror: the image does not 'incarnate' in the mirror, and what must be contemplated is the image shown by the mirror, not the mirror itself. If the mirror breaks, the being whose image the mirror bore does not cease to exist at all. It is this theophanic awareness that underlies the famous *hadîth (hadîth al-rûyâ)* in which the Prophet, evoking a celestial vision of completely youthful glory, testifies: 'I have seen my God in the most beautiful of forms.' This is a *hadîth* that Rûzbehân quotes with particular fondness, and every Sufi aspires to attain this vision. But how is this possible without transgressing the law of transcendence (*tanzîh)* and *tawhîd?* It can only be so if, in the gaze of the contemplative, the very figure he contemplates contemplates itself; that is to say, in that *tawhîd* of love formulated both by the Platonic dictum and by Meister Eckhart's thesis. Neither the religion of the Law nor philosophical dialectic can pave the way. The doctrine developed in the book **The Jasmine of the Believers in Love** can only be understood in the light of the experiences lived in the visionary state, as recounted by Rûzbehân in his **Spiritual Diary**, especially that in which he is told: "Seek me in the mystical abode of love".

4. "Seek me in the mystical abode of love"

But anyone who dares to embark on this quest will find themselves compelled to challenge the norms and ways of thinking of mainstream, institutionalised religion, and their ideas will sound like paradoxes (those *shath* that Rûzbehân was so fond of). To remain faithful, with absolute sincerity, to the presence of his inner God, perhaps he had to be seen as a 'mangy sheep' in the eyes of right-thinking Muslims. Such was the case with those known as *the malâmatî.* Hâfez was one of them. Now, Rûzbehân tells us a detail about himself that serves to underline his affinity with Hâfez. He does so on the occasion of one of those visions in which the contradiction between the One and the Many is resolved for him—that contradiction which exoteric theology is powerless to overcome, since it shrinks from it. "In my youth," he writes, "I had a shaykh who was a man of great mystical knowledge, a *malâmatî* shaykh, whose true nature was unknown to ordinary people. One night, I was gazing upon a vast plain in the plains of the Mystery, and suddenly I saw God in the form of that shaykh, standing at the head of that plain. I approached him. Then he beckoned to me, pointing to another plain. I moved towards that plain, and once again I saw a shaykh like him, and that shaykh was also God. Once more he beckoned to me, pointing to another plain, and so on until he had revealed seventy thousand plains to me, and each time, at the head of each plain, I saw a figure like the one I had seen on the first. I said to myself

: God Most High is nevertheless unique, one, undivided; He transcends (*monazzah)* number, whether great or small, as well as equals, opposites and similars. Then it was said to me: 'These are the theophanies of the eternal attributes, for they are boundless.' At that moment, I felt upon me the power of the esoteric realities of *tawhîd*, from the sea of Magnificence."

The meaning of this vision is perfectly clear. The multiplicity of boundless theophanies—a stumbling block for the naive consciousness that would easily see in them polytheism—is resolved each time as the multiplication of unity by itself, the product of which is always and in every instance unity, that is to say, the unity of the Contemplator and the Contemplated.

This is the mode of vision that allows the mystic to find in the creature, without negative theology or the dialectic of the inaccessible, the secret of the Uncreated. Then, in another vision that reveals to him the whole series of divine attributes corresponding to the human form, he is admitted to partake of a mysterious divine supper; Rûzbehân exclaims: "My God, you transcend the act of eating and drinking. If the tears of repentance are the drink of the angels, what of the tears of desire and intimacy at the moment of vision?". And he said to me then: "That is my drink".

The details of the inner conflict raging in the depths of the subconscious between the mystic's aspiration and the rigidity of egalitarian *tawhîd* emerge—and are thus resolved—on the horizon of transconsciousness when that horizon becomes clear in the visionary state. These are the phases of the struggle that constitutes the trial of the Veil; they present themselves chiefly as the details of the conflict between the two dangers I have just mentioned, that of assimilation (*tashbîh)* and that of abstraction (*ta'tîl)*, especially when the visionary experiences, with increasing frequency, the paradox of the vision of the Unseen revealing itself to him, as to the Prophet, 'in the most beautiful of forms'. In the course of one of his visions, Rûzbehân "experienced," he writes, "a longing, a love, a desire, which mutually intensified. During my ecstatic state, all concern for *tashbîh* and *ta'tîl* was banished from my heart, for in His presence the norms of intellects and knowledge crumble. Some time passed. [...] I remained for several hours immersed in my ecstasy. Then, I saw Him at dawn. He revealed Himself in Beauty and Majesty in the solitudes of the Mystery, on the threshold of the Place of the Mystery, painting the streaks of the eternal dawn with the blood of the *Abdâl"*. Then Rûzbehân wonders whether it is, then, true that he is one of them. And we now know what it means to be one of them. He is overcome with joy, after fear. He recalls another vision; another vision in which he himself was sacrificed as a victim of his loving audacity. His blood spread through the streams of the world of the Mystery, but as it spread, it was transmuted into pure light: "My blood took on the appearance of the sun's rays at the moment of dawn, when it appears more immense than the heavens and the earth. And multitudes of angels took of my blood (that is, of this light) and painted their faces with it."

It is no exaggeration to say that this *Spiritual Diary* of Rûzbehân is an extraordinary document, and that were it not for it, the secret of his life and his inner experience would remain

would largely escape us. We found our shaykh meditating one night, troubled by some doubt regarding the meaning of his sermons at the mosque. The incident that occurred during his first sermon in Shîrâz suggests that this concerns his doctrine of the intertwining of human love with divine love, by virtue of the pre-eternal covenant established between love and beauty. Then God reveals Himself to him with a beauty that surpasses all those that had previously marvelled him: 'In a form,' he says, *'befitting the secret of my love.'* And in this confession is expressed the full meaning of the mystical experience for a theophanic consciousness such as Rûzbehân's. Then he is told: 'Doubt not. It is in keeping with my secret that you have preached to guide creatures and make them aware of the divine favours prepared for them."

I shall cite two further visions, for they underscore this confession with a more explicit testimony. One night, Rûzbehân walks through the plains of the Mystery. Through his secret consciousness, he is asked: 'Where are we going?' 'Towards pre-eternity,' he replies. 'What, then, are you seeking?
'My annihilation in the violence of pre-eternal realities, for I cannot be satisfied with the vision of amphibology (*iltibâs)?*' 'It is a long journey,' he is told; 'I am going with you; I shall be your companion on the way.' As he progresses, God becomes invisible to him; he feels annihilated in the world of *Jabarût* (the world of divine powers and names). "Then," he writes, "showing me a gracious sweetness, He says to me: '*Seek Me in the mystical abode of love*, for, behold, neither the world nor anything in the world can withstand the assaults of My Majesty.'"

These final words herald the conclusion of the trial into which the *Book of Obscurity* has led us. In the 'mystical abode of love', the Witness *(shâhid)* is no longer the *separate eye* that gazes upon God, but the *eye*, the *mirror*, *through which* God gazes and reveals Himself in the infinite variations of 'the most beautiful of forms'. One night, with the assaults of *tawhîd* and the Inaccessibly Sublime beating violently against his heart, Rûzbehân hears this question: "Who are you to call yourself my servant?". I felt utterly ashamed. I said: "What attribute can I name, since I am but a thing amongst the things that belong to you?" But he said to me: "You are not a true unifier unless you forget yourself and all that is distinct from me, from the Throne to the Pleiades." I remained as if transfixed within the bosom of an immense Veil, when the great plains of the Mystery were illuminated, and behold, pointing to himself, he said to me: 'It is I who belong to you' (*anâ laka).* Then, approaching me in the form of a divine Youth (as beheld by the Prophet), he said to me: 'Here, your heart is no longer distressed by the utterance of *tawhîd*, for here *tawhîd* is a ruse and a deception, since you are my eyewitness and I reveal myself to you in the form of grace and beauty.' Thus, it is *tawhîd*, the profession of the unitary faith, which contains the most subtle and fearsome form of the Trial of the Veil. From it emerges triumphant he who seeks the One in the mystical abode of love, for there the Beholder (*shâhid)* and the Beheld (*mashhûd)* cease to be two, becoming nothing but one. That will be the whole teaching, the whole mystical pedagogy of the book that Rûzbehân titled *Jasmine of the Believers in Love.*

5. Majnûn, the 'mirror of God'

As the first chapter informs us, this book was conceived following a conversation with a person—a girl or a young woman—whose name the author discreetly withholds. We know only two things about her: her extraordinary beauty, which Rûzbehân extols with every word at his disposal, and her depth of spiritual understanding, evident in the highly pertinent questions she poses to the author, which prompted the writing of the book. The questions all converge on this one: what meaning can human love have for a Sufi? A curious feature, not without humour, is that she begins by addressing Rûzbehân in the

language of the strictest orthodoxy, an orthodoxy that was always more than reticent regarding the passionate expressions of Sufism.

Firstly, is it permissible, and does it truly make sense, to use the word ‘love’ in reference to God (love of God, to love God, etc.)? This is the point at which the devout ascetics of Mesopotamia—who were initially known as Sufis—hesitated, out of fear of God’s absolute transcendence. Rûzbehân, however, can now draw upon a whole lineage of celebrated masters who had endorsed this use of the term, with the conception it implies and whose consequences for religious history can be glimpsed. But, having accepted this, the beautiful interlocutor finds even more reason to ask: ‘O Sufi, in divine love, what place does human love have?’. Rûzbehân then invokes the testimony of Sura 12 of the Qur’an (the story of Joseph and Zulaika), and alongside phrases attributed to the masters of Sufism, the authority of famous *hadîth*, in particular that which the Prophet uttered: “Whoever loves, remains chaste and dies without having betrayed his secret, dies as a true witness (*shahîd)*.” In reality, Rûzbehân’s answer is entirely contained within the question he in turn poses to his interlocutor: “Just as you are in the sight of God, that is to say, just as God beholds Himself in you, who then are you? You?". To pose this question is to assume the spiritual initiation that imbues human beauty with a sacred meaning, as a divine manifestation, as theophany par excellence. That is why, ultimately, his interlocutor will ask Rûzbehân to compose a book that serves as a guide, an *Imâm*, for all adherents of the religion of love, leading them along a Path in which human love, rather than being posited as an antagonist to divine love, is instead its initiation and, when it reaches the limit of its perfection, manifests as its blossoming.

What has gone before now enables us to glimpse the foundations of the mysticism of love characteristic of Rûzbehân’s Sufism and of Iranian Sufism in general. The stages of the inner pilgrimage through which the chapters of the Book of *Jasmine* lead us imply, in effect, the following postulate: the mystery of divinity, of the hidden Treasure that reveals itself, is represented and experienced by the mystic as the very mystery of pre-eternal love, and it is from this initial intuition that the relationship between divine love and human love is experienced as a relationship between two forms of one and the same *Eros.* By virtue of this implication, the human form of love (‘*ishq insânî)* becomes the necessary initiation into its divine form (‘*ishq rabbânî)*, which means that it is the very experience of human love that leads to the discovery of the divine secret, as enunciated by esoteric *tawhîd*, which is professed by ‘the elite of the elite’ among the Sufis. Now, this secret is expressed as an identity which, to the common consciousness, can only appear paradoxical. Our spiritual masters were well acquainted with its formulation in the *Theology attributed to Aristotle.* Rûzbehân, in turn, puts it this way: “From before the worlds and the becoming of the worlds existed, the Divine Being is love, the lover and the beloved.” Or also: “The love of the Divine Being, know this, is just as His Knowledge is. He never ceases to be the lover of Himself, just as He never ceases to be knowing and contemplating Himself by Himself.” Only the *tawhîd* that fulfils and realises this unity is the authentic *tawhîd* that triumphs in the trial of the Veil, whilst common faith and exoteric consciousness, proclaiming an existent that transcends all *other* existents, remain in fact trapped in the snare of an inescapable duality.

The distance between the two spans the entire gulf separating *homo religiosus* and *homo mysticus*. The latter occupies a plane of consciousness prior to (or subsequent to) the subject-object opposition; that is to say, a state in which neither the objectification nor the socialisation of *the* religious *object* is possible, for it is a state in which the Divine Being is experienced as the absolute Subject that animates every instance, every existence. Since the latter is, for himself, the object of his own knowledge, and since he reveals himself in his Image—the primordial human Form—so that the *Anthrôpos* or celestial Adam may know himself in it whilst being known by it, it is necessary that the knowledge the Image has of him be no different from the knowledge he has of it. Consequently, the love experienced by this creature, which is his image and his theophany (*tajallî)*, cannot be an event foreign or extrinsic to the divine longing and the ecstasy of love that the divinity experiences in itself and for itself.

This metaphysics of Sufism, which I summarise to the extreme, underpins Rûzbehân's essential dual idea: if human love is the initiation into the tri-unity of the divine mystery, it is because esoteric *tawhîd* is articulated in the very terms that express the supreme perfection of human love; if such is its essence, only then can the experience of human love lead to its discovery. It is the fruit of the admonition perceived in the visionary state: "Seek me in the mystical abode of love. For neither the world, nor anything in the world, can withstand the assaults of my majesty." That is why Rûzbehân carefully distinguishes between those Sufis whose spiritual beginnings have not known the experience of human love, and those for whom this experience has marked the entrance to the spiritual Path. She designates the former as the 'pious ascetics' or 'devotees' (*zohhâd)*, whilst the latter are properly the *'ashiqân'*, whom we translate as 'Believers in Love' to distinguish them from the former, drawing them closer to their Western counterparts, the *Fedeli d'amore*, Dante's companions.

Of course, this spirituality of Rûzbehân—which is also characteristic of all Iranian Sufism—is the antithesis of the common notion of asceticism, in which sensory beauty is presented as a diabolical trap, whilst human *eros* and divine love are perceived as two mutually exclusive options between which the ascetic must choose from the outset. But let us make no mistake: just as it is not enough to step outside the individual to attain the divine, neither does the radical individuation posited by this mystical religion of beauty exclude a rigorous ethic—one all the more rigorous in that it is a wholly individual ethic, at times heroic and secret, epitomised in the figure of *the javânmard*, the 'knight of the soul'. Rûzbehân affirms this: one must have crossed the bridge suspended over the hell of sensual nature in order to be able to say, as he says to the woman to whom The *Jasmine* was dedicated*:* "It is impossible to cross the torrential river (the *jayhûn*) of *tawhîd* without the bridge of your love". Or, to use other images dear to Rûzbehân: "Since it is one and the same love, it is in the book of human love that one must learn to read the rule of divine love." Yes, it is a single text, but one must learn to read it, and this exercise is difficult. The message of beauty is a prophetic message that implies a double meaning (*iltibâs)*. Like any prophetic text, it posits a *ta'wîl*, a spiritual hermeneutics. It invites us to move from an improper, inauthentic and 'metaphorical' form of love (*'ishq majâzî)*—which is love in the 'literal' sense, sensual love—to love in the

true and authentic sense (*'ishq haqîqî)*. But here the exegesis of the text is an *exegesis* of the soul, that is to say, an *exodus* of the soul that departs from itself to make room within it for the One.

This is the painful pilgrimage of love, a pilgrimage that reproduces the *three* phases of *tawhîd* in a parallelism so striking that their statements ultimately merge.

The *first* phase of *tawhîd*, that of ordinary human beings, moves simply and naively from the sensible world to God, from a natural *object* to a transcendent *object*. A *second* phase, at which some mystics come to a halt, moves from *the* personal *self* to God, into whom they immerse themselves and in whom the personality of that personal *self* is annihilated. The *third* phase moves from God to God; it does not depart from Him. It in turn annihilates that annihilation to which the mystic succumbs in the second phase. The mystic then re-emerges, rising from the sea of over-existence (*baqâ'*); annihilated in his own nothingness, he leaves nothing to subsist but the triunity of love, the lover and the beloved. That *tawhîd* is fulfilled in divinity itself and, therefore, does not depart from it; hence the secret of human love, as it is then experienced, is implicated in the mystery of divine love. In a formula of extreme conciseness, Rûzbehân declares: 'Henceforth the mystic, absent, sees God through God' (*bî-khwôd Haqq-râ be-Haqq bînad).* He sees, undoubtedly, but at the same time it is not he who sees. It is God who sees through him: he is the eye through which God contemplates Himself, which also means: "The above has become the below, and vice versa." Now, at the very limit of its ecstatic perfection, the experience of love is expressed in the same terms. That is why the exemplary couple of Majnûn and Layla, the Tristan and Isolde of Persian and Arabic 'romanticism', is endlessly offered up for meditation by the 'Faithful of Love' amongst the Sufis.

To illustrate the case of the mystical lover, who, through the perfection of his love, unites within himself the two modes of being—that of the lover (*'ashiqî*) and that of the beloved (*ma'shûqî*)—he introduces here two famous verses attributed sometimes to Majnûn, sometimes to Hallâj: "I am the one I love; she (or he) whom I love is I; we are two spirits immanent in a single body." "Then," he says, "when that spiritual state reaches the limit of its perfection, it is *God Himself who, through His own eternal gaze, contemplates His own eternal face.* The mystical lover, Majnûn, is the *eye* through which God loves Himself in the object of that love. 'Everything that is not that indivisible instant,' said Rûzbehân, 'is nothing but the world of the duality of objects. Meditate on this singular fact: it is I myself who, though absent, am the lover of myself (*man bar man bî-mân 'ashiq-am).* I never cease to contemplate myself, even whilst absent. So, who am I?" The only possible answer is suggested by this allusive poem:

> In search of Jamshîd's Grail I travelled the world,
> not resting a single day, nor sleeping a single night.
> But when I heard the master describe Jamshîd's
> Grail,
> the Grail that reveals the world, it was myself.

As we see: the transition from human love to divine love does not consist of moving from one *object* to another. It is a metamorphosis of the *subject* that takes place, such that the notion of the object

It takes place in such a way that the notion of an object ceases to exist, for God is *not* an object. God is the very *subject* of love, who is both the lover and the beloved.

The Divine Being finds there its Witness-of-Contemplation (*shâhid)*, for the Contemplator (*shâhid)* has become the Contemplated (*mashhûd)*; the poignant divine jealousy arising from its own longing, as evoked for us in the *Book of Veiling*, is henceforth redeemed. For Rûzbehân, too, Majnûn is much more than a model whose example is to be proposed and applied for the use of pious Sufis in search of divine love. This way of understanding Majnûn's case was within the reach of pious ascetics, but it is not tailored to the Believers in Love. Majnûn's state makes him the 'mirror of God'; is being that mirror, then, anything other than realising divine love, which is the unity of love, the lover and the beloved? If Majnûn had not realised that unity, how could he possibly have murmured, in his state of total absorption, his famous words: 'I am Layla. My name is Layla'?

That is why other words from our anonymous Ruzbehaní commentator speak to us of a triple mirror of contemplation: 1) the mirror in which to contemplate the invisible, the *absconditum*, the esoteric aspect of the Divine Being, are the three subtle organs of perception: the heart, the secret (*sirr*) and the spirit. 2) The mirror in which to contemplate the apparent, the manifested, the visible form of God, the phenomenon of the divine (*sûrat-e Haqq)*, consists of the external senses, the faculties of sensory perception illuminated by the three subtle organs. 3) The mirror in which to contemplate the eternal Face of God consists of the human eyes illuminated by love.

Thus, if Rûzbehân's fundamental insight has reminded us of a no less fundamental thesis of Meister Eckhart (the gaze with which I know Him is the same gaze with which He knows me), we might add that Rûzbehân of Shiraz could be seen as a Meister Eckhart who had also written something akin to the story of Tristan and Isolde. Bringing these two things together may seem like a paradox to us Westerners, but it probably provides the finest possible characterisation of the Iranian mystical genius as expressed in its mystical epics and across a vast swathe of its Sufism, from Sanâ'î to Nûr 'Alî-Shah. Shaykh Rûzbehân belongs to the lineage that includes Ahmed Ghazalî, Aymol-Qazât Hamadânî and Fakhroddîn 'Erâqî, one of the most illustrious troubadours of Iranian Sufism (d. 688/1289).

If I place particular emphasis on the latter, it is because there is, amongst others, a poem by Fakhroddîn 'Erâqî that perfectly encapsulates the entire restlessness of these seekers of God in love, since this poem stubbornly repeats the question that these authors have ceaselessly posed, one after another, over the course of the centuries, for they are people to whom 'this question pertains'. Before concluding, I would like to quote an attempt at a translation of this short poem. Here it is, in the simple and poignant tone of the same theme stubbornly repeated: *kojâ'i? kojâ'i?*, 'where are you?'.

I am beside myself with love for you.
Where
  are you?
With my soul I seek you, you who are my soul.
Where

are you?
I run towards you across the world,
I search for you everywhere. Where are
you? The world cannot contain your
beauty,
so how can I know what you are like and where you are?

No one can reach where you are,
so whom shall I ask? Who can know where you
are?
You are manifest, and yet hidden from all. And
if you are not hidden, where do you reveal
yourself? ...
To my frightened and perplexed heart
give a sign on the Path. Where are you?
Poor Eraqî is beside himself because of
you,
will you not finally say to him: 'O madman of
love, where are you?'

In the question which, when turned on its head, is resolved, we perceive in Eraqî a teaching identical to that of Rûzbehân. For the moment when the Contemplator discovers, in the very act of his contemplation, that he is the Contemplated, is the moment when he who asks the question: 'Where are you?', finally hears it being asked of him in turn. But at that moment, the mystery of the famous Sufi maxim penetrates: "He who knows himself knows his Lord", and at the same time the meaning of the exhortation in the Qur'anic verse penetrates: "O soul at peace, return to your Lord, accepting and accepted". For between the famous maxim and the Qur'anic verse there is a bond deeply contemplated by Sufism, a bond that mutually guarantees them, with a secret assurance, as affirmed by this admirable verse by Hafez of Shiraz, the illustrious compatriot of Ruzbehân: "Death will never be sweet to him whose heart is alive with love". In that couplet resonates the profound tone of Sufism.

Tehran, 25 November 1958.

IV

Manichaeism and the religion of beauty[1]

It is not my intention to propose a new hypothesis regarding the origins of Catharism, nor to answer the question of whether or not there is a historical connection, with material and indisputably recognisable traces, between Manichaeism and Catharism, in one way or another. Whatever discretion is relatively required in the historical discussion, it is no less appropriate to raise the question to another level: that of spiritual facts as such. There, the problems of causality and external influence lose their importance, if not their meaning. For what is considered from that perspective are the spiritual types and what the features they have in common reveal to us of the supersensible world. From that point of view, those who have long regarded Catharism as the extreme western form of Manichaeism were not mistaken.

For this reason, a researcher professionally committed to exploring the Iranian spiritual universe is entitled to express what certain issues raised by the Cathars' religion and worldview suggest to him and what thoughts they provoke. Among these issues, there is one in particular which I have heard several friends deeply involved in Cathar studies discuss, and which poses certain difficulties, especially for those who do not share the same fervour. The issue is this:

What is the relationship between the troubadours and Catharism? The more the link between Manichaeism and Catharism is highlighted, the more pressing the question seems: can the mysticism of love, the ecstasy of adoration of human beauty, have anything to do with the rigorous asceticism of Manichaeism?

The fact that the negative answer seems obvious to many reveals that, in general, knowledge of Manichaeism does not go beyond a level of opinion that distorts the vision and meaning of this religion to the point of caricature. However, we have Arabic and Persian texts from the early Islamic period—that is, from a time when Manichaeism was still alive in Central Asia—which provide explicit testimony to this religion of beauty professed by the Manichaeans.

In the face of these texts, whose authors undoubtedly knew better than we do what they were talking about, the same banal and ineffective objections have been repeated in our own time.

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[1] This text is a paper presented on R.T.F. during a series of programmes devoted to Catharism by Jacques Magne. Its original purpose serves to justify its extreme brevity. To add everything that might have been desirable would have forced us to alter its structure, and no doubt also to compromise the density of allusion that was required of us. Readers interested in the subject discussed here and seeking a broader context are referred to our three recent works: *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabî,* Destino, Barcelona, 1993; *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth,* Siruela, Madrid, 1996; *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism,* op. cit.

These objections can be countered by considerations that would apply equally to the troubadours, and which are corroborated by their Iranian counterparts and contemporaries, whether by the adherents of Sohravardî's theosophy of light, or by the long line of Sufis who, from Rûzbehân of Shîrâz in the 12th century, have professed the same religion as our Fieles de amor.

The heresiographer 'Abdol-Qâdir Bagdâdî informs us of the existence of a school known as the *Holmânîyâ*, named after its founder, Abû Holmân, an Iranian originally from Fârs (d. 340/951). This school held that God had established himself in beings of beauty, and in their fervour, we are told, its adherents prostrated themselves before every human manifestation of this beauty[2] (I believe Gérard de Nerval recorded something similar to this in his *Voyage en Orient* [*Journey to the East*].

Better still, a writer of the fifth century of the Hegira, that is to say, of our eleventh century, Abû Shakûr Sâlimî, refers us expressly to the Manicheans of China, Khotan and Tibet. They worship, he tells us, everything that in their eyes manifests beauty: lights, flowing waters, trees, animals, because in every beautiful being, in every beautiful object, the divinity of light has made its dwelling. The author uses here a term characteristic of Sufism, saying: in every *shâhid*, that is, in every witness of contemplation. He emphasises his connection with the aforementioned school, and naturally implies that the Shi'ites share in this doctrine.[3]

Finally, the great theologian Ghazâlî (d. 1111) conveys the same information to us, specifying that these are the Turks of the Far East, that is to say, the Uyghur Turks. We know, in fact, that the Uyghur Turks had adopted Manichaeism, and it must be noted to their great credit that their state, though unfortunately short-lived, was historically the only one in which Manichaeism was not persecuted. As for them, Ghazâlî tells us, they do not have a *sharî'at* (that is, a religious law in the Islamic sense of the term), but they have a God, a Lord, who is the most beautiful of all beings, and for this reason they prostrate themselves before every being whose beauty is perfect, saying: 'This is our God.' A strictly orthodox Islamic theologian, Ghazâlî speaks of these things not without a certain unease, but admits that they are closer to the vision of the Light than the idolaters, because they venerate absolute beauty, not a specific thing to the exclusion of another, and because they venerate natural beauty, not a beauty fashioned by their own hands.[4]

It is possible—indeed, it is quite likely—that the heresiographers, in their prejudice, have exaggerated matters. However, there is one fundamental feature that can be discerned, and which will be confirmed by other sources. It is nevertheless significant that, even recently, it has been argued against these perfectly explicit texts that nothing could be less Manichaean than the veneration or worship of which they speak, professed towards all beings that manifest beauty.

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[2] Cf. the text cited by Hellmut Ritter, *Das Meer der Seele: Mensch, Welt und Gott in den Geschichten des Farîduddîn 'Attâr,* Leiden, 1955, p. 452.

[3] Cf. the text by this little-known author, *ibid.,* p. 453.

[4] Cf. the text by Ghazâlî, *ibid.,* p. 454.

For, we are told, beautiful human beings, beautiful plants, splendid animals, are also bodies, material beings, and, as such, entirely demonic *(daêvik).*

The divine light that permeates the world is beautiful, certainly, but it is incorporeal and spiritual, and does not manifest itself in material substances.[5] It seems to us that this is the sort of objection which, whilst being entirely marginal, inevitably entangles problems and research, since it bases its assertions on precisely what is under discussion.

Indeed, the argument completely loses sight of a mode of simultaneous perception of the sensible and supersensible world which, whilst not being that of the rational consciousness of our day, is no less indispensable for perceiving the phenomenon of beauty we are discussing. The argument implicitly confuses Manichaean physics and the Manichaean perception of light with a Christian physics of the Incarnation, which has entirely different premises. A first sign to note, in fact, is the difference from the official Christology of the Councils; it is foreshadowed in the well-known framework whereby the Christology of Manichaeism is inseparable from its anthropology. This Christology and this anthropology presuppose, broadly speaking, a threefold structure of man—body, soul and spirit—and are thus opposed to the reductionist duality of soul and body. It is quite possible that our present confusion, like all materialism, whether naive or scientific, has its origin in this mutilation.

In any case, without this threefold structure, it is impossible to understand the relationship that the Manichaean view establishes, on the one hand, between the one it calls Jesus-Radiance, the Self of Light, the saving Spirit (whose figure alternates in Eastern Manichaeism with that of the Virgin of Light, that is to say, Sophia), and, on the other, the suffering soul which is his *member* and which is the fragment of Light held captive in Darkness. A mixture, no doubt, but one that is not a fusion similar to that of material bodies, for the substance of light cannot materialise. And it is all these captive particles of light, waiting impatiently for the appearance of their saving member, that the Western Manicheans—that is, the Africans—designated as *Jesus patibilis,* the suffering Jesus, nailed for the entire duration of this Aeon to the cross of matter. Wherever light, radiance, pleasing colour, fragrance or delightful sound are found—even in minerals, metals and plants, and especially in flowers and fruits—the Manicheans saw the *Jesus patibilis*, the imprisoned soul of light.[6] There is a striking agreement with the testimony found in our Islamic writers. Jesus is both the suffering psyche and the heavenly Self, the Holy Spirit of which the former is a member: the form of manifestation of the luminous nature.

It is precisely this notion of ‘form of manifestation’ that characterises in the finest way the contrast between *theophany* and *incarnation* in the common sense of the word, and it is this contrast, denoted by the same technical term (*mazhar)*, that is found in Islam, throughout the theosophy of Shi’ism and Sufism. As for us, we can certainly admire, for example, the red matter of a red body. On the other hand, if we admire an image in a mirror, it is not the matter of the mirror that is beautiful and admired, but the image displayed there. The example of the mirror is the comparison traditionally used by all our authors to explain how they perceive the phenomenon.

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[5] See the curious letter from W. Henning reproduced *ibid*., p. 454.

[6] See K. Kessler, in **Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*,* vol. XII, p. 208.

Beauty is the light that transfigures beings and things, without becoming part of them or being embodied in them; it is present in them in the manner of the radiant image in a mirror, which is the place of its appearance. That is why the worship of beauty is the worship of light manifested through the veil of perishable flesh, without ever being an inherent attribute of matter or a qualification of the flesh or of matter.[7] Beauty is of a spiritual essence; the phenomenon of beauty is an appearance of the supersensible. Ismaili theosophy has placed particular emphasis on this point, and this helps us to understand more accurately the intentions attributed to the Manichaeans of Central or Eastern Asia.

It is noteworthy that the Iranian Sufi who is perhaps the most representative of the religion of Beauty, Rûzbehân of Shîrâz, in the 6th/12th century, makes frequent allusions to those villages of Central Asia, some of whose inhabitants were, at the time, reputed to possess extraordinary and superhuman beauty.[8] One of his works in Persian, The *Jasmine of the Believers in Love,* is a kind of autobiographical dialogue in which what he calls the prophetic sense of beauty shines through on every page; the Sufi is, in a sense, the prophet of absolute Beauty. And thus we are able to understand how and why, for Rûzbehân and his disciples, human love, far from contrasting with divine love, is on the contrary the indispensable spiritual pedagogy for accessing the latter. Divine love and human love do not present themselves as a dilemma, imposing a choice between them, as is an indispensable requirement for monastic vocations in Christianity. In reality, it is not a matter of two different loves, each determined and defined by a different object (for God is never *an object)*, but rather two forms of one and the same love. From one to the other, there is no transfer from a human object to a divine object, but rather a metamorphosis that takes place within the subject, that is, within the lover. This is why Rûzbehân expressly distinguishes between those he calls ‘pious devotees’, the ordinary Sufis, and those who are properly the Believers in Love. In the latter, a metamorphosis takes place in the way the Beloved is perceived; they thus become capable of perceiving the omnipresent entity of the Light, that is, of Beauty: Light and Beauty which are of a supersensible order.

We are undoubtedly in the presence of a spirituality that marks a decisive break with our usual categories. We have attempted to outline very briefly the roots of this spiritual phenomenon. It seems to us that the Manichaean vision of the Light, far from being at odds with this perception of beauty, is, on the contrary, its very foundation. From this, we can also glimpse the relevance of these comparisons for all those concerned with the significance of the troubadours in relation to Catharism. A significance that extends beyond Occitan civilisation as such, given that there were also Cathars in the North. And perhaps this is why those who consider that the problems

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[7] On this fundamental insight and its Iranian context, see primarily our edition of Rûzbehân Baqlî Shîrâzî (d. 606/1209), *Le jasmin des Fidèles d'amour* (Bibliothèque Iranienne, VIII), Paris, Adrien Maisonneuve, 1958, pp. 6 and 19–20 of the introduction in French.

[8] Cf. *ibid.,* p. 101.

Spiritual matters admit of no excuses nor solutions decided upon by others beforehand, for the urgency of the spiritual man remains as it is: neither past nor overcome.

March 1961.

V

On the Musical Sense of Persian Mysticism1

I should like to suggest, in a few pages, how it appears to me that, amongst all the forms of mysticism known to our religious studies, Persian mysticism is characterised by having always tended towards musical expression, and by having attained its fullest expression therein. The fate of music in Islamic countries did not, over the centuries, follow the same course as in the West; no doubt because those who condemned its use saw in it nothing more than a profane diversion. In contrast, what our mystics produced is something equivalent to what we call sacred music; and the reason for this is so profound that, if we have understood it, all music, provided it has been devoted to its supreme purpose, will seem to us to be nothing other than sacred music. But is that not a new paradox?

I believe that every Iranian has, to a greater or lesser extent, the famous prologue to the Masnavi by Jalal-ud-Din Balkhi Rumi—whom we in Iran more commonly call Mawlânâ—present in their memory. This prologue perhaps contains the justification for the paradox I have just formulated. I have been convinced of this by a recent discovery, in the course of my research into an eminent Iranian thinker, almost unknown to the general public today, but who, when the time comes, will, I am sure, deserve a place in our anthologies of the history of philosophy and spirituality; I am referring to Qâzî Sa'îd Qommî, a 17th-century philosopher. In one of his great works, still in manuscript form, Qâzî Sa'îd Qommî recalls and comments at length on some words spoken by one who also occupies a prominent place in Iranian hearts: the first Imam of the Shi'ites, Mowlânâ Ali ibn Abî Tâlib. According to this tradition, the first Imam said one day before his family:

> Because there were concerns in my heart that distressed me and I found no one to whom I could confide them, I struck the earth with the palm of my hand and entrusted my secrets to it, so that whenever a plant sprouts on Earth, that plant is one of my secrets.

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1 This article was originally published in *Horizons franco-iraniens,* December 1967. Curiously, this is – to our knowledge – the only text in which Corbin speaks at length of Rumi, the great Persian mystic, who is conspicuously absent from the French Islamologist's work. *(Translator's note)*

Certainly, this is not an agronomic secret. The Earth in question is not the earth that bears our footsteps and which is today in the process of being devastated by the ambitions of our excessive conquests. It is the ‘Land of Light’ that can only be seen with the eyes of the heart.

But it is up to us, to each and every one of us, to look upon that earth with eyes capable of seeing it, and, by looking upon it in this way, to ensure that the Land of Light looks upon us too, that it concerns us as well. It is up to us, by striking the ground of that Land of Light together with the Imam, to see certain plants emerge from it that reveal to us our barely sensed secrets. And as occupying a pre-eminent place among those plants, the philosopher Qâzî Sa'îd Qommî names the reed from which the mystical flute is carved, whose lament breathes forth the prologue of *the Masnavi* and which, as we know, is associated with all the religious services of the Order of Mowlânâ.

We have all heard at least a few couplets from that prologue sung:

> Listen to the story told by the reed flute, the tale of
> partings whose lament it breathes forth.
> Ever since I was cut from the reed bed, my lament
> has moved men and women to sorrow.
> He who is abandoned far from his original source
> longs to return to the time of their union.
> My secret is not far from my lament, but the light
> is absent from the eye and the ear.
> The body is not veiled from the soul, nor is the soul
> veiled from the body; yet no one is permitted to
> see the soul.
> The sound of this flute is of fire, not a breath of
> wind. He who does not possess that fire,
> will likewise die!

Certainly, no one has ever seen the soul with the eyes with which we normally see the things of this world. It can only be sensed through the lament of the mystical flute, severed at its source, in the Land of Light. That which springs from that Land and was separated from it—the story of exile and return—is the obsession of Persian mysticism, and that is something which cannot be seen or proven rationally, something which cannot be recounted or seen with direct vision, but which only the musical spell can make us sense and see, to the extent that listening to music suddenly renders us 'clairvoyant'. And that is, in a nutshell, what I would like to suggest when speaking of the musical sense of Persian mysticism.

The inexpressible that Persian mysticism feels compelled to express is a story that transcends what we call history, a story we should call *meta-history,* for its unfolding lies at the origin of origins, prior to all events recorded and recordable in our chronicles. The mystical epic is that of the exile who, having arrived in a foreign world, is on his way back home, to his own world. What this epic seeks to convey are the dreams of a prehistory, the prehistory of the soul, its pre-existence to this world, dreams that always seem to us to be a forbidden shore. For this reason, in an epic such as the *Masnavi,* one can scarcely speak of a succession of episodes, since all of them are emblematic, symbolic. All discursive dialectic is excluded. The overall awareness of

that past and of the future to which it invites us beyond the limits of chronology can only attain its absolute nature *through music*.

To experience his 'Holy Book', that *Masnavi* which is often called the 'Persian Koran', mystics are, by their very nature, bound to *sing* in order to *speak*.

This also seems to be the structure of every musical gathering that is often, quite simply, improvised amongst friends in Iran. The instrumentalist begins with a long prelude whose sound gradually swells. The human voice then intervenes as in a *crescendo*, beginning with muted tones, to culminate in a poignant climax and descend once more, gradually, towards silence. And the postlude with which the instrument accompanies that silence seems to fade away at last like the arpeggios of a distant light, that light whose new dawn every mystic yearns for.

What is known as the *samâ*, the spiritual concert, the *oratorio*, goes far beyond, of course, the case of Mowlânâ and his Order. It is the entire history of Iranian Sufism that is present here, for although some strict, even puritanical, masters regarded the spiritual concert with suspicion, others, on the contrary, practised it with the assiduity of a ritual from which each would derive a deeply moving experience. Among the latter, I wish to mention at least one great master, Rûzbehân Baqlî Shirâzî, in the 12th century, a compatriot of Hâfez of Shîrâz, whom he preceded by some two centuries and with whom he shared numerous affinities.

However, towards the end of his life, we see Rûzbehân abstaining from the practice of listening to music; he no longer needed the mediation of audible sounds; he listened to the inaudible sounds of a purely inner music. It is his entire life that thus exemplifies this structure of musical listening I mentioned a moment ago. To a relative who asked him the reasons for this abstention, Shaykh Rûzbehân replied: "Now, it is God Himself in person who offers me His concert (or God Himself in person who is the oratorio I listen to). That is why I refrain from listening to anything offered to my ears by anyone other than Him (or any other concert other than Him)."

At the end of a lifetime's experience, at the moment when the ear of the heart—that of the inner man—becomes indifferent to the sounds of the outside world, behold, it hears sounds that the distracted man, lost to himself, torn away from his true self by the ambitions of this world, will never hear. What the ear of the heart then perceives are sounds, a music that a privileged few have also perceived in this world, from beyond the grave, to the point where the opaque partition became for them pure transparency. A friend and disciple of Shaykh Rûzbehân was left particularly inconsolable after his death. The two had, for years, made a habit of chanting the Qur'an in turn together every day at dawn. The loneliness of the friend was such that, after Rûzbehân's death, he took to sitting, every dawn, in Shîrâz, at the head of his grave, and there, alone, beginning the chanting of the Qur'an. But one day, Rûzbehân's voice was heard from the unseen, and from one world to the other—or rather, in the same in-between world—the two friends resumed their alternating chanting of the Qur'an together.

And so it went, dawn after dawn, until the friend confided in one of his companions. “Since then,” he says, “I have never heard Rûzbehân’s voice again.”

This seems to suggest that, whilst the mystic must *sing* in order to *speak*, and whilst the essence of mysticism is essentially musical, that essence remains incommunicable. The moment one has the audacity to communicate it, to reveal that fleeting instant when it seems that ‘the soul becomes visible to the body’, then that secret eludes us.

Therefore, I shall say no more. But I would wish, in conclusion, that this sacralisation of music practised by Persian mysticism might help us to sense the meaning of a ‘beauty’ that is currently rejected in this world by a veritable fury of negation and destruction. I would wish for us to perceive the significance and enduring presence of an art that is not a passing fad. The work of Mowlânâ, like that of Rûzbehân and so many others who illustrate the spiritual history of Iran, is essentially, in each case, the expression of a personality that will never be seen twice among men. Therefore, anyone who has truly understood this will never think that they are ‘outdated’.

Paris, 1967.

VI

Mysticism and humour[1]

Sooner or later, every seeker commits some indiscretion. Thus, for example, I recently committed one, in the course of a conversation which, however, did not seem to harbour any danger. It occurred to me, since the subject was mysticism, to join two words which, at first glance, seemed quite incongruous with one another. That was enough for their unexpected, somewhat paradoxical association to first sketch out, then clarify, and finally impose what is known as the subject of a lecture. And since one must not refuse friendly requests, this afternoon I must pay the price for my indiscretion.

I have been asked to come here to speak about mysticism … and humour. To show that these two words might be connected, we must first make it perfectly clear what each of them means. That would be a daunting undertaking, requiring the deployment of extensive historical, philosophical and technical resources. I prefer to regard this simply as a casual chat during which we shall see why these two words – mysticism and humour – are linked.

The reason for this was none other than the life and work, in the 6th/12th century, of Shihâboddîn Yahyâ Sohravardî, whom the entire Iranian tradition hails as the *Shaykh al-Ishrâq*, the master of that theosophy of Light which calls itself 'Eastern' wisdom, in the metaphysical rather than geographical sense of the word: 'Eastern', then, because it is illuminating, and illuminating because it is 'Eastern'. It was Sohravardî who was the subject of the imprudent conversation to which I have just alluded; it was he, therefore, first and foremost, who was responsible for my imprudence; I ought, therefore, to bear a grudge against him. However, I cannot, because his work represents, for the Orientalist philosopher that I am, a love of my youth, and because it is ultimately he who guided me, as if by the hand, to the heart of that country, Iran, twenty-five years ago now. In return, I have devoted several years of my life to the restoration and interpretation of his works; there is, therefore, an unbreakable bond between him and me, and I hope that this bond has served as a starting point for the renewal of Sohravardian studies[2].

We shall therefore turn to him to ask why these two concepts—mysticism and humour—are so closely linked. There are, of course, other mystics we could consult. Yet it is to this great Iranian philosopher and mystic that we shall primarily turn, for three fundamental reasons. The first is the significance of his work, which has dominated the landscape of

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[1] This text was first published in *Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism,* Institute of Islamic Studies, Tehran, 1971. *(Translator's note)*

[2] For a list of Corbin's main works on Sohravardî, see 'Bibliography' in S.Y. Sohravardî, *The Encounter with the Angel,* op. cit., pp. 36–38. *(Translator's note)*

philosophy and spirituality in Iran over several centuries, and which seems destined for a revival in our own time.

Secondly, Volume III of the collected works of Sohravardî has just been published as Volume 17 of the "Bibliothèque Iranienne", issued by our Department of Iranian Studies at the Franco-Iranian Research Institute in Tehran. This substantial volume brings together in a single *corpus* all the works written *personally* by Sohravardî, a master of clear and magnificent 12th-century Persian. The publication of this volume is not only a milestone for Iranian bibliography, but also, more generally, for philosophical studies as such. This volume arrives at the right time, albeit slightly delayed, and this is the third reason I put forward. Indeed, the volume of works in Persian should have appeared more than two years ago, had it not been for printing issues, which are always unpredictable. For it was two and a half years ago, precisely on the 5th of Rajab 1387 in the Islamic lunar calendar—corresponding to 10 October 1967 and the 18th of Mehr 1346 in the Iranian solar calendar—that we should have commemorated the eight-hundredth anniversary of the martyrdom of Shaykh al-Ishrâq, at the age of thirty-six, in the citadel of Aleppo, on the 5th of Rajab 587, corresponding to 29 July 1191. We are therefore two and a half years behind schedule. However, when it comes to eight centuries, the deviation is minimal, especially for philosophers and mystics accustomed by vocation to view things only *sub specie aeternitatis.* In any case, the publication of this volume allows us, especially this afternoon, to commemorate his eighth centenary together, and I believe that the significance of this anniversary will resonate far and wide in the hearts of our Iranian friends.

These words now compel me to say, or to recall, something more about Sohravardî's work, since it is certain passages from his work that will help us understand the necessary and wholesome conjunction—at a given moment—between mysticism and humour. Perhaps some of you will recall that, last year, we studied in Sohravardî's work the sign of the transition from the heroic epic to the mystical epic. That transition is undoubtedly a pivotal event in Iran's spiritual culture; we shall verify this in a great many of those mystical epics so characteristic of the Iranian genius; too many names would have to be cited here, from ʻAttâr, ʻAssâr of Tabrîz, Jâmi and so many others right up to Nûr ʻAlî-Shâh. On a personal note, I shall say that, for a long time now, I have been hoping to have a student to whom I might entrust the task of a comparative and in-depth study of the cycle of the Iranian mystical epic and the cycle of our mystical epic in the medieval West. I am well aware that this can only be a work of maturity, but by delving into it, one would truly reach the point of contact between our two cultures. Right here we had studied the passage in question in a few pages that can be found precisely in the edition of Sohravardî's Persian works[3].

There was, regarding the Grail of Kay Khosraw, the magnificent account of the Grail by a Khosrawani mystic. For Sohravardî, Kay Khosraw is an exemplary figure among the ecstatic rulers of ancient Iran, to the extent that he is the eponymous hero of the *khoswâwânîyûn*, the precursors in pre-Islamic Iran of the *ishrâqîyûn* (the adherents of the Theosophy of Light of our Shaykh, those known as *ishrâqîyûn-e Iran*, that is to say, the Platonists of Persia).

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[3] On this subject, see H. Corbin, 'De l'épopée héroïque à l'épopée mystique', in *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme,* op. cit., pp. 163–235. *(Translator's note)*

In addition, there were the episodes from *the Shâh-Nâmeh*, whose mystical meaning is suggested to us by an initiatory tale by Sohravardî, entitled 'The Archangel Dyed Purple' (*'Aql-e sorkh')*[4]: the episode of the birth of Zâl, the child whose hair still bears the imprint of the world of light from which he comes and who typifies the soul cast into the desert of this world; then, the episode of the death of Esfandyâr, the hero of the Zoroastrian faith, linked to the eschatological motif of Sîmorgh. For, can one see Sîmorgh without dying? And all this made one regret that Sohravardî did not live long enough to treat Ferdawsî's *Shâh-Nâmeh* in this way, from one end to the other, and to teach us to read it with the aid of that symbolic hermeneutics known as *ta'wil*, just as all the spiritualists read the Qur'an with the aid of that hermeneutics. But right there we see a clear indication emerge regarding the meaning of his work, and also regarding the way in which he crafted it.

Shaykh al-Isrâq clearly articulated the purpose of his work on several occasions: to revive the mystical theosophy of Light and Darkness espoused by the sages of ancient Iran, a wisdom which, in his view, was profoundly distinct from all dualistic philosophies and for whose restoration he explicitly and consciously declared he had no predecessor. Mollâ Sadrâ Shîrâzî, his greatest interpreter, still hailed him in the 16th century as 'the reviver of the doctrines of the sages of ancient Persia'. Some three centuries before the great Byzantine philosopher Gemistos Plethon, then, Sohravardî developed a doctrine uniting the traditions of Hermes, Plato and Zoroaster, the prophet of ancient Iran. It could be said that he, in a sense, brought back to Iran those sages whom the encounter between Greek and Iranian wisdom had led to be designated elsewhere as the 'Hellenised magi'. But how did he achieve this repatriation? Precisely, the mystical interpretation of the episodes from *the Shâh-Nâmeh* to which I have alluded shows us: with the aid of that spiritual understanding which the term *ta'wîl* connotes par excellence as the hermeneutics of symbols, and thus with the resources offered by spiritual Islam, the spirituality of mystical Islam. *Ta'wîl* consists of tracing a thing back to its origin, to its archetype: it is discovering, beneath the outward appearance of the letter, or of any phenomenon, the esoteric meaning, that is to say, the hidden meaning, the inner truth. It is through this inner truth that the elevated knowledge of all forms of wisdom communicates with one another. There is undoubtedly in Sohravardî something akin to a sense of spiritual ecumenism, to use a term much in vogue today, but an ecumenism whose foundation remains esoteric, that is to say, hidden, that is to say, inner. If it is to be realised—though it is already realised in secret—it is through the lofty heights, or through the depths, not at the level of common exoteric evidence, which is always vulnerable; for, being accessible to all and serving as the basis for immediate interests, it is also accessible to all passions and all betrayals.

Hence we find, in our Shaykh al-Ishrâq, such a rigorous conception of philosophy that, for him, all philosophical inquiry, if it does not lead to a mystical experience—that is to say, to a personal spiritual realisation—is vain and fruitless. Conversely, any attempt to attain mystical experience in the absence of serious philosophical training runs the risk of

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[4] S.Y. Sohravardî, 'The Archangel Clad in Purple', in *The Encounter with the Angel,* Trotta, Madrid, 2002, pp. 39–66. *(Translator's note)*

to lose one's way in the desert of illusions and madness. Hence the no less rigorous starting point of all philosophical inquiry, formulated as self-knowledge.

This does not mean the knowledge that each person might acquire of their minor faults and major virtues. That is not what the philosopher means. What acquiring self-knowledge means is becoming aware of what is implied by the fact of a subject who knows themselves, who is self-aware. In other words, it is to awaken to oneself, to all that an expression such as this implies: I know myself, I am conscious of myself. That *'I'* which expresses itself in this way is placed in the presence of a Self that is different from *the* 'I' speaking in the first person, since the latter takes it as the object of its knowledge. So different, indeed, that this *Self* appears to it to possess a substance infinitely more stable and permanent than that *'I'* which discovers it and refers to it; a discovery which, upon reaching its culmination, may lead to an inner vision of that Self, which then appears as the inner teacher, the personal guide. The discovery is so profound and its effects permeate so deeply into every dimension of life that it is best summed up by the famous phrase: 'He who knows himself knows his God'. It is a phrase upon which many books have been written in Islam, for it articulates the highest inner experience of the spiritual person. Indeed, some of Sohravardî's works aim to describe this inner encounter and the conditions that prepare for it.

We thus observe that this spirituality is oriented towards a particular conception of man, whose ideal, ultimately, is encapsulated in the designation of the Perfect Man (*al-Insân al-Kâmil;* the Hermeticists, too, spoke of *the anthrôpos teleios).* The Perfect Man is he who, in mystical terminology, is also designated as the 'Pole' (*Qotb),* the mystical pole, he whom the masses of men generally ignore and cannot but ignore, even though without the existence of that pole, even in secret, the human race could not persist in being and would plunge into a final cataclysm, for it is through him that the invisible higher world and the world of our everyday reality still communicate. In Shi'ite terminology, we know that the term 'pole', or the expression 'pole of poles', designates the Hidden Imam. Moreover, wherever it is used, it is rare for there not to be at least something akin to crypto-Shi'ism. And that is perhaps the ultimate meaning of the case that the *'olamâ* of Aleppo brought against our Sohravardî when, without wishing to enter into the subtle philosophical distinctions presupposed by the science of prophethood, they reproached him for maintaining in his books that God could, at any moment and in any age, create a prophet. Our Shaykh did not, unfortunately, respond to them with the humour evident in some pages of his books, but with the impetus of his youthful ardour. Perhaps he felt protected by the friendship of al-Malik al-Zahîr, governor of Aleppo, and of Salâheddîn's own son (the Saladin of the Crusades). But we shall continue to wonder what motive had driven him on that fateful journey to Aleppo, where he found neither the spiritual climate of Iran, that of his native Sohravard, nor the one that had welcomed him among the Seljuk princes of Anatolia. On three occasions the *'olamâ* of Aleppo intervened with Saladin to secure his execution. On three occasions Saladin had to threaten his own son al-Malek al-Zahîr with misfortune if

he continued to protect his friend. And so it was that Shaykh al-Ishrâq died a martyr in the citadel of Aleppo, on the 5th of Rajab 587, 29 July 1191. He was exactly, as I recalled a moment ago, thirty-six years old.

Despite his youth, he has left us a considerable body of work, a body of work which, over the centuries, has nourished the philosophical and spiritual life of his disciples, the *Ishrâqîyûn*, those who are also called the 'Platonists of Persia'. This body of work strikes us as particularly rich in perspectives that remain untapped and which could, in our own day, stimulate questions very different from those that are commonplace amongst our contemporaries and which drive us towards widespread bewilderment and disorder in the intellectual sphere; these perspectives might grant us access to a continent of the soul which, for many, is today a lost continent.

I shall say a few words about the content of this work: broadly speaking, we can identify a tetralogy of powerful philosophical works, the culmination of which is the *Book of Eastern Theosophy*, which contains the essence of our Shaykh's thought and whose insight, as he tells us, came to him suddenly, on a marvellous day, although it subsequently took him many months to put it into writing. In addition, there are some shorter works: some philosophical, but in the Sohravardian sense of the word, that is to say, where philosophy inevitably leads to the essence of the spiritual life; the others strictly mystical, some of which are written in the form of accounts of personal initiation, others in the form of parables or symbolic stories. Some are in Persian, others in Arabic. It is the treatises written in Persian that can now be found collected in the volume published to mark the eighth centenary of his death.

Here, we arrive at the heart of our discussion, but we can only reach that heart by following the paths I have attempted to sketch out in broad strokes.

I have just referred to the form taken by Sohravardî's mystical treatises, and I had previously indicated that in some pages of these treatises we find evidence of a *sui generis* humour. So, perhaps we should begin by answering the two questions posed at the outset: what is mysticism? What is humour? Daunting questions, to which I am not even sure a satisfactory answer can be given. I shall simply point out, first of all, that the term 'mysticism' is one of the most profaned and tarnished words of our day, used with ridiculous levity and thoughtlessness, on occasions or in contexts where it would be utterly out of place if its true meaning were really understood. And I do not believe I am the first to voice this protest. Let us make it clear, then, that we are using it here in its strict sense, as it might be used in a religious or metaphysical context and as implied by its Greek etymology. *Mystikos* is that which is hidden, invisible to the faculties of sensory perception, ungraspable at the level of common evidence and by the organs of common perception. *Mysticism* is, both in terms of the word and in terms of facts, essentially associated with *mystery*, with what in antiquity were called mystery religions, whose initiates were known as *mystes* (the Eleusinian mysteries, the mysteries of Mithras, etc.). The Greek word *mystikos* is, therefore, equivalent to *bâtin, ghayb, makhfî, mahjûb, penhân*, etc.

But then, what does it mean to penetrate mystically into the world of mystery? It is a penetration that is achieved neither through the faculties of sensory perception nor through rational understanding, and

yet it is a penetration that is entirely of a noetic, that is to say, cognitive, nature (and it is to this that the use of the word *'erfân'* in Persian corresponds).

It is an insight that strips away all the evidence upon which ordinary consciousness is based; whilst we might call this ‘waking consciousness’, for the mystic, on the contrary, this so-called waking consciousness is nothing more than a heavy sleep—the sleep of ignorance and spiritual blindness. What appears to ordinary people as *day* then becomes the world of night, and vice versa. The organs of insight—whether called inner vision, the light of the heart, the active imagination, the centres of the subtle body, etc.—are generally atrophied and paralysed in the ordinary man of our day, who no longer even has any inkling of their existence. This perception is truly an entry into the *fourth dimension*, the one that Sohravardî designates with a Persian expression he himself coined: *Nâ-kojâ-âbâd*, the ‘land of nowhere’, but that expression could not be translated as ‘utopia’ without incurring the worst of contradictions. It is a country (*âbâd)*, a real country, but one whose coordinates cannot be fixed on our geographical maps, for there is a gap between the outer or exoteric world and the inner or esoteric world, the *Malakût*, the world of the Soul. It is a country where relations of local distance are replaced by relations of distance between states experienced inwardly. To reach that pure space of the soul, it is necessary, as our mystics say, to leave the cosmic crypt, to emerge into the outside world. No spacecraft, however sophisticated, will ever bring us close to it. Moreover, the subtle worlds, the beings of light with whom the mystical pilgrim unites, have always been there; only our spiritual blindness prevented us from seeing them. As Sohravardî says, if a man blind from birth were to regain his sight and see the sun for the first time, he might ask the sun: ‘Why were you not there before?’

With these words, I believe I have suggested why it is essential for a spiritual culture to possess a metaphysics and a theory of knowledge that does justice to these worlds, situated between the intelligible and the sensible, and we may say that, through the philosophy of *Ishrâq*, Iranian culture has possessed such a metaphysics and such a theory of knowledge. Certainly, we have had its equivalent in the West, but we lost it perhaps a little over three centuries ago, and that is one aspect of the tragedy of our philosophy. To guard against one aspect of that tragedy, Sohravardî sought to establish a safeguard, requiring every mystical vocation to have a solid philosophical grounding. For if man cannot do without contact with the *Malakût*, attempting to reach a world to which access has been cut off entails, under certain cultural conditions, certain dangers. It is important to look that danger squarely in the face, in order to confront it, a danger to which the mystic who ventures into *Nâ-kojâ-âbâd* is exposed. In short, this danger is what modern psychiatrists refer to as ‘schizophrenia’ in its various forms, and it is the visionary’s inability to distinguish between the inner world of his visions and the world of everyday reality. Nowadays, not a day goes by without the news bringing to our attention regrettable examples of this! Without reaching that extreme, it may happen that the privilege of a supranormal experience leads the subject to develop what modern psychologists call an inflated ego or a superiority complex... In such cases, the experience that ought to make the subject a renunciant—and, for that very reason, a guide for others—awakens in him worldly or political ambitions of which he becomes a plaything; in

short, the very opposite of what a *dervish*, a renunciant, does. This is the danger—which might be called *subjective*—to which the mystic whose preparation is insufficient is exposed.

There is another danger, which we might call *an objective* danger. Having overcome the first danger, if the mystic wishes to describe his experience—to describe what he has seen and heard, the worlds and events he has witnessed—how can he do so without betraying the secret? without exposing that secret to misunderstanding, to mockery, to the scorn of the ignorant? Without, consequently, handing over the treasure entrusted to him into the hands of the unworthy, of those who are not his heirs? In short, how can he do so without violating what, in the Western esoteric tradition, has been called the *discipline of the arcane?* And we know how and why, under the name of *taqîyeh*, this discipline is prescribed by the Imams of Shi'ism; we know how Sohravardî was concerned with it, to the point that he had invented a secret script for his great *Book of Eastern Theosophy*. One of his mystical tales, the *Epistle on the State of Childhood*,[5] shows us the novice pilgrim speaking recklessly of mystical secrets to a stranger who ends up treating him harshly and taking him for a madman; even more seriously, this indiscretion results in the loss of the presence of his shaykh, that is, his inner guide, whom he will never find again.

Right! It's time we asked ourselves the question: what does humour have to do with mysticism? First of all, I think there is a general consensus that there is no possible definition of humour, and the search for one has long since been abandoned, even by our British friends, who are, nevertheless, particularly well versed in the subject. Consequently, I shall not attempt to do so either. But, if we cannot find a satisfactory definition, perhaps we can identify some of its effects. I would suggest that humour involves the ability to step back, to withdraw, to take a certain distance from oneself and from things; and that withdrawal provides the ability not to take entirely seriously that which, deep down, one inevitably takes terribly seriously; but this is done without betraying its secret. Without that distance from things, one runs the risk of becoming their captive and victim. On the other hand, if one is able to create that distance, the tense expression, the pathetic gesture, the defensive—even aggressive—attitude give way to a smile, perhaps barely a hint of one.

This brief observation, on which I do not wish to dwell at length, will, I hope, suffice to give us a glimpse of the fact that the relationship between mysticism and humour lies in the fact that humour is, perhaps, the mystic's safeguard, in the sense that it protects him from the dual danger I described a moment ago as a subjective danger and an objective danger. And it is to Sohravardî's own testimony that we may turn for this. More precisely, in the first case, it will be the dual testimony of Avicenna (Ibn Sînâ) and Sohravardî, since the example I am about to propose is taken from *The Tale of the Bird*, composed in Arabic by the philosopher Avicenna and translated into Persian by Sohravardî. As a mystical tale, The *Tale of the Bird* is a minor masterpiece by Avicenna; a French translation can be found in my book on Avicenna, which is now in its tenth

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[5] "L'épitre sur l'état d'enfance", in S.Y. Sohravardî, *L'Archange empourpré,* Fayard, Paris, 1976, pp. 383–412. *(Translator's note)*

old, in which I sought to demonstrate its place within the cycle of Avicenna's narratives, situating it within the context of what would have been Avicenna's 'Eastern philosophy' had the manuscript not been destroyed during the sacking of Isfahan and had Avicenna had time to rewrite it.

Moreover, it is worth situating this narrative within the tradition that developed around the symbol of the bird, from Ghazâlî to 'Attâr's great mystical epic. Its origins are ancient. The first reference that comes to mind is Plato's *Phaedrus*, where the soul is imagined as an energy whose nature is that of a winged chariot carrying a charioteer who is likewise winged. And there is also the magnificent image of the celestial procession of souls following that of the gods, and of the fall of some of them. "It is in the nature of the wing," writes Plato, "to be able to carry aloft that which is heavy, lifting it to the realm where the race of the gods dwells, and among all things related to the body, it is the wing that has the greatest share in the divine." So much for the symbol of the bird, of which there are other magnificent examples, for instance in certain Manichaean psalms.

Let us now turn to Avicenna's account, as translated by Sohravardî. Its opening is poignant: 'Is there no one among my friends,' asks the author, 'who will lend me a little attention so that I may confide in them a part of my sorrow? [...] Brothers in Truth! Shed your skin, as the serpent sheds its scales [...] Love death, so that you may remain alive. Be ever in flight; do not choose a specific nest, for it is in the nest that birds are captured." There are thus two magnificent pages in this vein. Afterwards, the narrator tells his story: how a group of hunters spread their nets and captured him along with a whole flock of birds of which he was a part; how, in his captivity, he forgot everything: his origin, his belonging to another world, and, finally, even lost awareness of the bonds that held him and the narrowness of his cage. How one day he saw other birds that had managed to free themselves and ended up joining them; how together they took flight, crossed the high peaks, traversed the lofty valleys of Mount *Qâf*—that is, the psychocosmic mountain—at the cost of exhausting efforts; how they found their brothers in the vicinity of the King's City, and how there they were received by the King, whose beauty filled them with awe; how finally their return was accomplished, this time in the company of the King's messenger, bearer of a command for those who had tied the knot and who were the only ones who could untie it. I cannot dwell on any detail, but only on the sudden change of tone that occurs at the end of the tale.

The reader had been carried away by the contemplation of "he who is wholly the Face you behold, wholly a Hand that gives", and lo and behold, suddenly the narrator, anticipating the sceptics who will receive his tale with gentle irony, writes these lines: "More than one of my friends will say to me: 'You must be somewhat out of your mind; indeed, it is likely that you have gone completely mad. Let's see! You have never flown. It is simply your reason that has flown. No hunter ever made you his prey; it is your

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[6] H. Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Narrative,* Paidós, Barcelona, 1995. *(Translator's note)*

Common sense is what has been hunted down. Besides, how can a man take flight? And how can a bird start talking? No, you really ought to go on a regimen: drink herbal teas, take hot baths, inhale water lily oil, watch your diet; no excessive fatigue, nor long nights out. We have always known you as a sensible man. Seeing you so distraught, we are overcome with concern, and we ourselves feel completely ill on their behalf."

I believe that the passages in which the humour of the physician Avicenna is given free rein possess an exemplary virtue; the mystic has spoken, he has attempted to recount his adventure. But he knows in advance how reasonable people will receive it; they will receive it as so many historians of philosophy have received the Neoplatonists, Proclus, Iamblichus and their emulators. What will happen? If he tries to confront them, opposing one argument with another, he will become infinitely vulnerable; he will not convince any sceptic, but perhaps he will convince himself, more and more, of the excellence of his case. And there he is lost, frustrated, well, perhaps as an example of a schizophrenic. What he must do is take that step back, formulating in advance, with complete clarity of conscience, what the sceptics and agnostics will oppose him with; then, what in the latter would have been a negative, aggressive criticism becomes, in him, a triumph of humour thanks to which he slips through the sceptics' fingers. Humour is his double safeguard, for whilst it warns him against all intoxication and all inflation of the ego, it erases the effects of what might have been a violation of the discipline of the arcane. Only he who has the capacity for it and is worthy of understanding will comprehend; the others will see nothing there. Yet, towards everything and against everything, *he will have conveyed his message.* It is thus that the mystic simultaneously finds his safeguard against the subjective and objective dangers that threaten him. And he finds this safeguard by speaking the language of *symbols.* And it so happens that this language is, as in Avicenna, as in Sohravardî, inspired by a higher humour.

But then, what exactly is a symbol? To put it precisely, it is best to refer to the meaning of the Greek word *symbolon.* The Greek verb *symbolleîn* means to bring together, to unite. For example, two men meet by chance as casual guests. Before parting, they break a ring or a lump of clay in two; each takes a half; each of the two pieces will then be the *symbolon* of the other. Years and years may pass, with all the changes that entails, but if they join their respective *symbolon,* they will be able to recognise one another as those who once met. In the case of our mystical metaphysicians, each *symbolon* belongs to its respective universe: the invisible world of *Malakût,* on the one hand, and the visible world of sensory perception, on the other. Together, the *symbolon* of one and the *symbolon* of the other form a higher unity, an integral unity. For the fact that here one *symbolon* unites with the other announces that the visible world *symbolises* the invisible world, if we speak the language Leibniz still knew. Therein lies the source of Goethe's famous phrase, at the end of the second *Faust:* 'All that is ephemeral is nothing more than a symbol' (we might also say: nothing less than a symbol). We thus immediately grasp the difference between the *symbol* and what is commonly called *allegory* today. Allegory remains on the same level of evidence and perception. The symbol guarantees the correspondence between two universes situated on distinct ontological levels: it is the means, the sole means, of penetrating the invisible, the world of mystery, the esoteric.

When I spoke a moment ago of the importance for a culture of having a philosophy that guarantees the function of symbols, the ontological, 'objective' validity of the intermediate world between the intelligible and the sensible, this is what I was referring to. The idea of this

The intermediate region presupposes the threefold articulation of the real with the world of the intelligible (*Jabarût*), the world of the soul (*Malakût*) and the material world, a triad to which the anthropological triad corresponds: spirit, soul, body.

From the moment philosophical anthropology reduced it to a dyad—soul and body, or, if one prefers, spirit and body—the noetic, cognitive function of symbols has been lost. However, this triad, abolished in the West since the 9th century, has survived only in philosophical or theosophical schools which are undoubtedly, and erroneously, labelled as marginal. Cartesianism recognised nothing but thought and extension. There was nothing but sensory perceptions and the abstract concepts of the intellect. It is thus the immense world of the Imagination—in the proper sense, the world of the Soul—which, identified with the *imaginary*, with the unreal, is doomed to decline.

It is quite striking to observe the care with which Sohravardî and the *Ishrâqîyûn* have addressed the metaphysics of the Imagination. Precisely because they recognised its ambiguous role, they keep it firmly centred between the intelligible and the sensible. In the service of the intelligible, that is, of Intelligence (the Greek *Noûs*), its function is to present the *veiled idea* in the form of an image, that is, of a symbol. The characters and events of a parable are symbols, and that is why the parable is also the only true story. Conversely, when the imagination allows itself to be entirely captivated by sensible perceptions, flitting from one to another, it is literally 'decentred' and loses itself in the unreal. In the first case, the active imagination is the organ of penetration into a real world, which we must designate by its proper name, namely, the *imaginal*; in the second case, the imagination produces nothing but the *imaginary*. In the first case, the imagination is, for Sohravardî, the celestial tree that rises on the summit of Sinai, from which the sages gather the exalted knowledge that is the 'bread of the Angels'. In the second case, it is the accursed tree of which the Qur'an speaks. Nowadays there is much talk of the civilisation of the image; I believe that on this subject our philosophers, *the Ishrâqîyûn* and others, have much to teach us. It is undoubtedly a very complex matter, on which I fear I may seem obscure by dint of brevity, but time permits me to quote only the essentials. Here we find ourselves at the source of Sohravardî's genius, at the source of an inspiration that enables him to move from one register to another, as on a great organ, and thus to present to us, through the symbols and parables of initiatory tales, what he expounds elsewhere, in his great books, in a theoretical and systematic manner.

I shall refer to just three examples, taken from a treatise by Sohravardî that does not take the form of a continuous narrative, but rather of a *rhapsody* that links several symbolic tales one after another.[7] There we see the people of the turtles, the people of the fairies, and the people of the bats appear. Of course, this is not a matter of zoology, but rather of symbols representing those among humans who are spiritually ignorant, blind of soul. They are recognisable in their symbolic form because their inner form, which consequently conceals their true form, *symbolises*

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[7] H. Corbin refers in the following pages to various passages from 'La langue des fourmis', in S.Y. Sohravardî, *L'Archange empourpré,* op. cit., pp. 413 ff. *(Translator's note)*

with that. And therein lies the whole difference, in relation to the staging of their daily lives, which reveals nothing but their apparent form. By revealing themselves in their symbolic forms, they show themselves to us as they truly are in the *imaginal* world, just as their ignorance or blindness fixes them in a wholly *negative* relationship with the *Malakût*, the world of the Soul. It is their truth, or rather their inner falsehood, that bursts forth, projected against the backdrop of evidence that overwhelms them, and it is there that the humour of a great mystic such as Sohravardî is given free rein.

A first example: what is under discussion is *Nâ-kojâ-âbâd*, the land of 'Nowhere', beyond the dimensions of perceptible space. One could write a scholarly treatise on the metaphysics of hyperspace in this regard. But it may also be the case that the doctrine is experienced to such an extent that it is no longer a theory, but becomes a real *event* of the soul. We then have the mystic in conflict with the people of the turtles. One day, the people of the turtles were watching from the shore the movements of a multicoloured bird on the surface of the sea: no sooner did it dive than it reappeared. One of the turtles asked: 'Is this bird of an aquatic or aerial nature? Another turtle replied: 'If it were not aquatic, what would it be doing in the water?' But a third said: 'If it were aquatic, it could not live out of the water.' Among the turtles there was a wise judge whom they asked. The judge told them: 'Observe it carefully. If it can live out of the water, it means that water is not necessary for it. The proof is the fish, which cannot live out of the water." High above, a great gust of wind arises; the beautifully coloured bird takes flight and disappears among the clouds. Will the turtles understand? No; they begin by asking the wise one to explain himself. He replies in an allusive manner, quoting them some phrases from great spiritual masters, culminating in the statement by the mystic al-Hallâj concerning the Prophet: 'He winked his eye beyond *the* where', that is to say, his inner vision raised him above the dimensions and orientations of sensible space. Then the turtles fly into a rage: "How," they ask, "can a being situated in space leave that *place?* How can one escape spatial directions and coordinates? (recall the end of *the Tale of the Bird).*" The sage replies: "That is precisely why I have told you everything I have just said." Then the turtles, indignant, hurl stones and earth at him: "Go away! We dismiss you; we do not recognise you as a judge!"

A second example. This time, the issue at hand is the relationship between day and night. What appears to be day to those who are spiritually blind is nothing but darkness to those who possess spiritual vision; and, conversely, what is broad daylight to them is nothing but a dangerous and menacing night to those who lack spiritual vision. This is how a hoopoe (the hoopoe is the bird of the wise Solomon) stopped, during one of its journeys, in the village of the fairies. Now, as everyone knows, the hoopoe has keen eyesight, whilst the fairies are completely short-sighted. The hoopoe spends the night chatting with the fairies and, at dawn, wants to set off again. But the fairies vehemently object: 'Wretched creature! What is this innovation? Since when does one set off when day breaks? The hoopoe replies that it is precisely at dawn that one ought to set off. The fairies reply: 'But you're completely mad! How can one see anything at dawn, in the darkness of day, when the sun passes through the realm of darkness?' 'But it's

exactly the opposite!", replies the hoopoe. The argument becomes heated; the fairies press the hoopoe to explain herself, and she then formulates the profession of faith of a great mystic: "Whoever sees during the day cannot but bear witness to what they see. Behold, I see! I am in the world of the Presence, in the world of direct vision. The veil has been lifted. I perceive the gleaming surfaces as so many revelations, without a shadow of doubt touching me." Then the fairies, stung by the behaviour of the bird that claims to see in broad daylight, pounce, claws and beak at the ready, upon the hoopoe's eyes, shouting mockingly: "Hey! She-who-sees-in-broad-daylight." The hoopoe finally realises there is no escape: what for her is the full light of day in the supersensible spiritual worlds is nothing but darkness that disorients those who see only what their fleshly eyes can perceive.

She realises that the fairies will kill her, for they attack her eyes—that is to say, her inner vision—and a mystic could not survive in that world if deprived of their inner vision. She realises that she must return to the discipline of the arcane, in accordance with the wise precept: 'Speak to people only in terms they are capable of understanding'. So, to rid herself of her enemies, she says to them: 'Of course, I am like you, like everyone else, and I cannot see anything during the day. How could I see clearly in broad daylight?' Then the fairies, reassured, cease to torment her. Until the moment she manages to leave, the hoopoe feigns blindness, even though this causes her a thousand torments in her soul, for it is hard not to be able to tell others of the wonders she is beholding. But, the author reminds us, it is a divine law that admits of no exception: 'To divulge the divine secret to the unworthy is a crime of impiety (*kofr)*'. And this is what underpins the necessity of esotericism. Astonishing! This debate of the 12th-century Persian mystic, struggling against the forces that seek to confine him to the darkness of his night, we find again expressed in the same image by a contemporary Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, when he addresses all those who refuse to heed the lament of the solitary man with this poignant plea: "Wipe the face of your watch. You do not even suspect that, outside, it is day."

Finally, a third example, the theme of which emphasises the story we have just read. Our shaykh's parable this time features a colony of bats and an innocent chameleon. How the dispute between them arose is left to our imagination. The fact is that the bats' hatred for the chameleon is such that they plan an expedition, taking advantage of the darkness of night, to capture the chameleon and take their revenge on him, killing him one way or another. So they did, and managed to take their poor enemy to prison. There they kept him locked up all night; in the morning, they agreed: 'How shall we punish this chameleon? What sort of death shall we inflict upon him?' In the bats' view, there could be no more terrible punishment than having to endure the sight of the sun. Consequently, they decided that this would be the punishment they would inflict on the chameleon: to force him to gaze upon the sunlight. But what their bat-like minds could not even begin to fathom was that this was precisely the kind of death the poor chameleon had been praying to God for. And the author cuts short the bats' deliberation with two of the most famous couplets by the mystic al-Hallâj: "Kill me, then, my friends. By killing me you will make me live, for to me to live is to die, and to die

is to live.” When the sun appeared, the bats cast the chameleon out of its prison, so that it might be punished by the sun’s glare. What they could not know is that what seemed to them to be torture for the chameleon was in reality its resurrection.

Three mystical parables that are very similar and, at the same time, as we can see, very different. They bring into play the characteristic features of Sohravardian humour, a humour that is ultimately the mask of a profound sadness, the sadness of the ‘man who has understood’, faced with his powerlessness to overcome the inability to understand found in most men, for that inability is the ‘secret of destiny’, and no human creature can penetrate that secret. I took the precaution earlier of pointing out that there is no possible definition of humour. If we try to analyse Sohravardian humour too closely, we risk losing sight of it.

What we can do, to conclude, is to follow our shaykh along the path of symbols. He was able to create some marvellous ones, because he possessed an inner vision of the figures they symbolised. It may be necessary for a man to reach the pinnacle of spiritual maturity—which is in no way linked to chronological age—in order to be capable of creating his own symbols. That summit is self-knowledge which, as we have already noted, lies at the beginning and the end of Shaykh al-Ishrâq's spirituality. For the attainment of this self-knowledge arises from a visionary experience whose memory recurs throughout his accounts. And that visionary experience shapes the most beautiful symbol of that Self which the philosopher seeks, that Self which is his transcendent Self, his heavenly Self, with which he symbolises the earthly Self. That symbol is the figure of light, of resplendent beauty, with the vision of which several of Sohravardî's mystical narratives begin or conclude, namely, the figure of the Angel who, amongst Avicennian philosophers, is the tenth of the hierarchical Intelligences, the Angel of humanity, and who, amongst theologians, is called the Holy Spirit. Notably, this same figure also shaped the inner vision in the West of those known as the 'Fieles de amor' (Lovers of God), chiefly Dante's companions, who had read Avicenna and Averroes; it is this figure of the Angel of Knowledge to whom they gave the name *Madonna Intelligenza.*

In Sohravardî, this figure of the Angel encountered in the course of the initiation narratives is always identified with a shaykh. Now, one of the commentators on these mystical narratives (Mosannifak) asks: why a shaykh? This has nothing to do with age or old age, since, almost always, the youthful features of the apparition are emphasised. And the commentator explains that shaykh means *morshed,* spiritual guide, and that the *ishrâqîyûn* (the philosophers and mystics of the school of Shaykh al-Ishrâq) have no other *morshed* than the Angel of Knowledge. It is precisely this, he says, that distinguishes them from the Sufis, who posit the need for a shaykh or human teacher; amongst the *Ishrâqîyûn,* this could, in any case, be nothing more than a momentarily necessary intermediary. For their shaykh, their *morshed* or spiritual guide, is the Angel himself, the Angel of their vision and their longing. We may therefore say that this experience of the Angel, among the *Ishrâqîyûn,* is very close to the experience which, in the school of Najmoddîn Kobrâ, is that of the personal inner guide, the invisible teacher, the one known as *shaykh al-ghayb, ostâd-e ghaybî.* And that is also why this figure of light that dominates the mystic's inner horizon is par excellence the *symbolon,* the figure with which he symbolises his most intimate personal being; it is the Self to which the subject—who is nothing but its earthly complement—gains access through self-knowledge. Here we arrive at an inner experience so fundamental that we could illustrate it with a great many texts; the entire Valentinian gnosis could be cited in its support.

At the same time, it is in a way Sohravardî's 'contemporaneity' that comes into view. I apologise for using the word 'contemporaneity' in such a context, for, truly, it is too laden with unfortunate connotations. Let us rather speak of presence, urgency... In saying this, I am thinking of a man, a playwright and novelist, who died recently, who at first glance may seem as far removed from Sohravardî as one could imagine, but some of whose writings

suggest a connection between the two men, with which I should like to conclude this lecture. I am thinking here of Audiberti, whose highly diverse body of work has admirers no less diverse.

But that he was a mystic, and somewhat of a visionary, is something on which any reader of a book entitled **Les tombeaux ferment mal** will agree, to one degree or another. However, it is another episode, contained in another book, that I have in mind; the book is titled *Dimanche m'attend*, and the episode is set in one church among all the churches of Paris, a monument whose architecture one cannot help but admire unreservedly, namely the Church of Saint-Sulpice, but which contains two treasures: its great organs and, in the first side chapel on the right as one enters, the immense painting by Eugène Delacroix depicting Jacob's struggle with the Angel. It is undoubtedly this very thing that suggested the parallel to my unconscious, even though the experience of the Angel in Sohravardî is a struggle *for* the Angel rather than a struggle *with* the Angel. Yet, without having read Sohravardî, Audiberti used to, whenever he passed by, enter the church to meditate for a few moments before Delacroix's painting, a meditation that easily turned into an experience of visualisation for him. And here is how he concludes the account of one of his visits:

"Jacob and the Angel, having bent down ironically over my bewilderment, resume their posture... The cold gets the better of me; the church empties. Outside, the rain brings a sheen to the square. Among the stationary cars (stationary but not condemned) walks a tall young girl in boots, wearing a hat, a grey sleeveless cape—the sleeves replaced by a sort of fabric wings—with very slanted blue eyes and blonde hair. I gaze at her in wonder. But I remember him... Believe it or not, I rushed into the church.

"The angel was still there...

Good! Here too we have an example of the *unique* humour characteristic of a somewhat visionary mystic. How could he tell us that he had *seen*—and not merely *thought he had seen*—but confess to us that he had gone back into the church to make sure that Delacroix's angel was still there? ...

Here, philosophical reflection comes to a halt, for it would destroy precisely what makes that humour so worthwhile.

There is but one thing left for us to do as we part, and that is to recall these lines by Rimbaud:

"And I have sometimes seen what man has thought he saw."

Tehran, 11 November 1969.

VII

From Heidegger to Sohravardî
A conversation with Philippe

Némo1

Philippe Némo: Henry Corbin, you were the first translator of Heidegger in France, and you were later the first to introduce Islamic philosophy from Iran. How can these two tasks be reconciled in the same man, bearing in mind above all that Martin Heidegger claims the West as his homeland? His philosophy is typically German, and one might think there is a certain disparity between devoting oneself to translating Heidegger and devoting oneself to translating Sohravardî.

Henry Corbin: It is a question I have often been asked, and I have sometimes noted, with amusement, the astonishment of those I spoke to upon discovering that the translator of Heidegger and the introducer of Iranian Islamic philosophy were one and the same man. And they would ask: how did he move from one to the other? I tried to explain to you some time ago, in a conversation we had shortly after Heidegger's death, that this astonishment is a symptom of compartmentalisation, of the tendency to label our disciplines *a priori*. People say: there are Germanists, there are Islamologists, Iranologists, and so on. But how could one move from German studies to Iranian studies? If those who ask this question had the slightest idea of what a philosopher is, of the philosopher's quest, if they could imagine that linguistic incidents are, for a philosopher, nothing more than incidents along the way, indicating nothing more than topographical variations of secondary importance, perhaps they would be less surprised.

I am taking this opportunity to say these things because I have come across some utterly fantastical accounts of my spiritual biography. I had the privilege and pleasure of spending some unforgettable moments with Heidegger in Freiburg in April 1934 and July 1936, that is, during the period when I was working on the translation of the collection of texts published under the title *Qu'est-ce que la Métaphysique?* I have been astonished to learn that, if I turned to Sufism, it was because I had been disappointed by Heidegger's philosophy. This version is completely false. My first publications on Sohravardî date from 1933 and 1935 (I graduated from the École des Langues Orientales in 1929); my translation of Heidegger appeared in 1938. A philosopher pursues his quest simultaneously on several fronts, so to speak, especially if philosophy is not limited for him to the narrowly rationalist concept that some have inherited from our Enlightenment philosophers. Far from that, the philosopher's inquiry must encompass a field broad enough to contain the visionary philosophy of Jacob Boehme, that of Ibn 'Arabî, that of Swedenborg, etc.; in short, to embrace the teachings of the revealed Books and the experiences of the *imaginal* world as so many sources open to philosophical meditation.

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1 This interview, recorded for Radio France-Culture in June 1976, was first published in print, revised and completed by Corbin, in *Cahier de L'Herne: Henry Corbin,* cit. *(Translator's note)*

Otherwise, *philosophy* no longer has anything to do with *Sophia.* My training was originally entirely philosophical; that is why I am, to tell the truth, neither a Germanist nor even an Orientalist, but a philosopher who pursues his Quest wherever the Spirit may lead him. If it has led me to Freiburg, to Tehran, to Isfahan, these cities are for me essentially 'emblematic cities', symbols of a ceaseless journey.

1. What I would like to make clear—despairing of being able to do so in the short time we have, for it would require me to write an entire book—is the following. What I sought in Heidegger, what I understood thanks to Heidegger, is the same as what I sought and found in Iranian-Islamic metaphysics, in the works of figures of whom I shall shortly recall some great names. But with the latter, everything was situated on a different level, transposed to a register whose secret explains why, ultimately, it is no coincidence that I was entrusted, immediately after the Second World War, with a mission to Iran, a country with which, for more than thirty years now, I have maintained an uninterrupted relationship, delving deeper into what its spiritual culture and spiritual mission were.

But I feel it is both pleasing and necessary to clarify one further point, precisely to convey what my work and my quest have entailed, what I owe to Heidegger, and what I have retained from him throughout my career as a seeker.

First and foremost is the idea of *hermeneutics*, which appears from the very first pages of **Sein und Zeit**. Heidegger's immense merit lies in having centred the very act of *philosophising* on hermeneutics. Forty years ago, when the word 'hermeneutics' was used amongst philosophers, it seemed strange, even barbaric. However, it is a term taken from Greek and in common use amongst Bible scholars. We owe its technical usage to Aristotle: the title of his treatise *Peri hermêneias* was translated into Latin as *De interpretatione.* There is a better one, for in today's philosophical usage, hermeneutics is what is called in German *das Verstehen*, 'understanding'. It is the art or technique of 'understanding', as Dilthey understood it. An old friend, Bernard Groethuysen, who had been a disciple of Dilthey, always returned to this in the course of our conversations. There is indeed a direct link between *Verstehen* as hermeneutics in Dilthey's 'comprehensive philosophy' and analytics, the idea of hermeneutics in Heidegger.

However, in Dilthey it derives from Schleiermacher, the great theologian of German Romanticism, to whom Dilthey had devoted an enormous work, which remained unfinished. There we find the theological origins, particularly Protestant, of the concept of hermeneutics which we now employ philosophically. Unfortunately, I have the impression that our young Heideggerians have somewhat lost sight of this connection between hermeneutics and theology. To recover it, it would obviously be necessary to restore a conception of theology very different from that which is customary today, in France and elsewhere; I am referring to that theology which has become the handmaiden of sociology, if not of 'sociopolitics'. This restoration can only be achieved with the aid of the hermeneutics practised in the religions of the Book:

Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for it is there that hermeneutics developed as a spontaneous exegesis and holds in reserve the palingeneses of the future.

Why? Because we hold in our hands a Book on which everything depends. It is a matter of *understanding* its meaning, but of understanding *its true meaning.* There are three aspects: there is the act of *understanding,* there is the phenomenon of *meaning,* and there is the uncovering of the *truth* of that meaning. Is that meaning what is commonly called the historical meaning, or rather a meaning that refers us to a level other than that of history in the ordinary sense of the word? To begin with, the hermeneutics practised in the religions of the Book brings into play themes and vocabulary familiar to phenomenology. What I found satisfying in Heidegger was, in short, the lineage of hermeneutics from the theologian Schleiermacher, and if I turn to phenomenology, it is because philosophical hermeneutics is essentially the key that unlocks the hidden meaning (etymologically, the *esoteric*) beneath the exoteric statements. I have therefore done nothing more than to pursue its further exploration, first in the vast unexplored domain of Shi'ite Islamic gnosis, and subsequently in the neighbouring regions of Christian and Jewish gnosis. Inevitably, given that on the one hand the concept of hermeneutics had a Heideggerian flavour, and on the other, my early publications referred to the great Iranian philosopher Sohravardî, certain 'historians' persisted in virtuously insinuating that I had mixed *(sic!)* Heidegger with Sohravardî. But using a key to open a lock is by no means the same as confusing the key with the lock. It was not even a matter of using Heidegger as a key, but of making use of the key that he himself had used and which was available to everyone. Thank God, there are insinuations which their very ineptitude reduces to nothing, and, for his part, the phenomenologist would have much to say about the false keys of historicism.

From this point of view, there is a book within Heidegger's body of work that is perhaps not discussed enough. It is true that it is an old book, one of the first that Heidegger wrote, as it was his habilitation thesis. It is a book on Duns Scotus. This book contains pages that were particularly illuminating for me, because they deal with what our medieval philosophers called *grammatica speculativa.* I derived immediate benefit from it when I was called upon to stand in for my late friend Alexandre Koyré in the Section of Religious Sciences at the École des Hautes Études, during the years 1937–1939. Having to deal with Lutheran hermeneutics, I had to put into practice what I had learnt from the *grammatica speculativa.*

There is indeed a notion that dominates the hermeneutics of the young Luther, that of *significatio passiva,* which is precisely what 'speculative grammar' deals with. The young Luther grapples with the verse from the psalm: *In justitia tua libera me*. How could divine justice—the aspect of Rigor opposed to that of Mercy—be an instrument of liberation? The contradiction is insoluble, insofar as this justice is made an attribute conferred upon God in Himself.

Everything changes when it is understood in its *significatio passiva.* That is to say, the justice by which *we are made* righteous. The same applies to the other divine attributes, which cannot be understood (our *modus intelligendi)* except in relation to us *(modus essendi),* and which should always be expressed with the suffix '-fic' (the *unific,* the

beneficial, verifying, *sanctifying*, etc.). It was this discovery that made the young Luther the great interpreter of St Paul, when he had come close to becoming his victim.

Now, I have encountered this hermeneutical situation in many great texts of Islamic mystical philosophy. Its specificity might well have remained hidden from me had I not possessed the key of the *significatio passiva.* A simple example of this is found in the advent of being, which in that theosophy is the setting of being in the imperative: *Kn, esto*[2] (second person, not *fiat*). That which is first, that which is neither the *ens* nor the *esse*, but the *esto*. "Be!" This imperative inaugurating being is the divine imperative in the active sense (*amr fi'lî)*; but considered in the being that it brings into being, in the being that we are, it is that very same imperative but in its *significatio passiva (amr maf'ûli).*

One might say, I believe, that therein lies the triumph of hermeneutics as *Verstehen*, namely, that what we truly comprehend is never anything other than what we experience and endure, what we suffer in our very being. Hermeneutics does not consist in deliberating over concepts; it is essentially the unveiling of what happens within us, the unveiling of what causes us to express a particular conception, vision or projection, when our *passion* becomes *action,* an active, prophetic-poetic suffering.

The phenomenon of *meaning*, which is fundamental to the metaphysics of **Sein und Zeit**, is the link between the signifier and the signified. But what does this link do, without which the signifier and the signified would themselves be mere objects of theoretical consideration? That link is the subject, and that subject is *presence*—the presence of the mode of being to the mode of understanding. Presence, **Da-sein**. I do not wish to revisit here the reasons which, at the time, according to our friends, led us to translate *Dasein* as 'human reality'. I am aware of how vulnerable this is, especially when, through all too frequent negligence, the hyphen is omitted—a hyphen that is essential for reasons we have explained. *Da-sein:* being-there, of course. But being-there is essentially an act of presence, an act of that presence *through* which and *for* which meaning is revealed in the present, that presence without which something like meaning in the present would never be revealed. The mode of that human presence is therefore to be revealing, but in such a way that, whilst revealing meaning, it is itself that reveals itself, itself that is revealed. Once again, the concomitance *of passion and action.*

In short, the link to which phenomenology draws our attention is the indissoluble link between *modi intelligendi* and *modi essendi*, between modes of understanding and modes of being. The modes of understanding are essentially dependent on the modes of being. Any change in the mode of understanding is concomitant with a change in the mode of being. The modes of being are the ontological, *existential* (I do not say *existentielles*[3]) conditions of 'Understanding', of *Verstehen,* that is to say, of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the very form of the phenomenologist's task.

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[2] *This:* the imperative form of the Latin verb **sum** ("to be"). *(Translators' note)*

[3] The standard French term for 'existential' is *existentiel;* Corbin coins the neologism *existential* here. As there is no reasonable way to distinguish between the two variants in Spanish, we retain them in French. As for their meaning, it should be borne in mind that *existentiel* refers to historical existence, and *existential* to metahistorical existence; they are, therefore, homologous – as Corbin explains later in this same interview – to the pair "historicity"/"historicality". From the point of view of Ontology, it could be said that *'existentiel'* refers to the ontic order, and *'existential'* to the ontological (*Translators' note)*

2. Let us turn to the unfamiliar vocabulary with which Heidegger confronts us, and which put his first French translator to the test. I am thinking of words such as *Erschließen, Erschlossenheit,* and all the terms that designate the acts through which the modalities of human presence are revealed; of terms such as *Entdecken,* to discover, to unveil the hidden, the *Verbogen.* However, I quickly realised that there were equivalents for these words in the classical Arabic of the great visionary theosophers of Islam.

Moreover, it is not difficult to find the bridge. I mentioned a moment ago Heidegger's book on Duns Scotus. We know, as Étienne Gilson has shown us, that Avicenna stands at the starting point of Duns Scotus's thought. Moreover, in the 12th century, thanks to the historians of the Toledo school, we had a common philosophical vocabulary, Arabic-Latin. Denis de Rougemont recalled not long ago with humour that, in the days when we were young friends, he had noticed that my copy of **Sein und Zeit** bore numerous glosses in Arabic in the margins. I certainly believe it would have been much more difficult for me to translate the vocabulary of Sohravardî, Ibn 'Arabî, Mollâ Sadrâ Shîrâzî, etc., had I not previously been trained in the exercises, in the acrobatics I had needed to perform to translate the German vocabulary found in Heidegger. I am thinking of Arabic terms such as *zâhir,* which means the external, the apparent, the exoteric, and *bâtin,* which denotes the internal, the hidden, the esoteric. A whole family of words is organised around these two terms.

This *zohûr,* the manifestation, the act of revealing oneself, of appearing; *izhar,* the act of appearing, of manifesting oneself; *mozhir,* that which causes manifestation; *mazhar,* the form of manifestation; the epiphanic form; *mazharîya,* the epiphanic function of a *mazhar.* In Persian there are terms such as *hast-kardan,* to bring into being; *hast-konandeh,* that which brings into being; *hast-kardh, hast-gardîdeh,* that which is brought into being. I shall not attempt to outline a dictionary here. These terms suffice to give a sense of the entire vocabulary of phenomenology. Is it necessary, then, to emphasise the mutual service that knowledge of Islamic theosophical vocabulary and knowledge of the vocabulary of phenomenology can render to one another? And all this, despite the difference in the breadth of vision that I shall mention shortly.

There do indeed exist what we call 'hermeneutic levels'. The term is commonplace today; at that time, it was far less so. It is, of course, in all cases a matter of considering hermeneutic levels *(modi intelligendi)* in relation to the different modes of being *(modi essendi),* which are respectively their supports. It is precisely these modes of being that must be distinguished, in order to avoid any hasty confusion between the modes of understanding—a misunderstanding against which I have never ceased to warn my students, in Paris and in Tehran.

To this end, it is important that we have a well-defined concept of phenomenology and hermeneutics on both sides. We have often wondered, for example, how to translate the idea of *phenomenology* faithfully into both Arabic and Persian. One attempted solution, which is not really a solution, consists of simply transcribing the word into Arabic script. It is no better to insist, as I have often seen my students or reviewers do, on searching for an equivalent by consulting a dictionary. The best solution was to begin by asking whether

Arabic or Persian vocabulary might not offer us a term designating a corresponding process. Now, there is a term in common use in mystical theosophy (*'erfân),* so common that it even serves as the title of more than one book. It is the term *Kashf al-mahjûb,* which means exactly 'unveiling of what is hidden'.

Is this not precisely the process of the phenomenologist, the process which, by unveiling and bringing to light the hidden meaning, concealed beneath appearance, beneath the phenomenon, carries out in its own way the programme of Greek science: *sôzein ta phainomena* (to save the phenomena)? *Kashf* is the unveiling (*Enthüllung, Entdecken)* that brings to light the truth hidden beneath the apparent, the *phainomenon* (think of all that Heidegger said regarding the concept of *alêtheia,* truth). That veil is ourselves insofar as we do not make our presence felt, insofar as we are not there (*da-sein),* at the postulated hermeneutic level. It seems, then, that we might walk together, even if we must anticipate a difference in perspectives—a difference signalled by the fact that, through this unveiling, our theosophists understand the unveiling of the *esoteric* hidden beneath the *exoteric* appearance. In this very respect, their hermeneutics remains faithful to what is both the source and the springboard: 'the phenomenon of the revealed Holy Book' which I mentioned at the outset.

That is precisely what the Arabic term corresponding to our term *'hermeneutics'* suggests, namely the term *ta-wîl*. Etymologically, the word *ta'wîl* means 'to trace something back to its source, to its archetype'. It is the technique of 'understanding' in which Twelver Shi'ite and Ismaili theosophers have demonstrated their expertise in the esoteric hermeneutics of the Qur'an. It is 'concealing the apparent and bringing the hidden to light', and the alchemists themselves understood their Great Work in no other way. On this path there are a multitude of hermeneutical levels, which also correspond to numerous levels of being. That is why authentic *ta'wîl* has nothing to do with the harmless "allegory". But it may be that as we ascend these hermeneutical levels, we get the impression of leaving our Western phenomenologist companion behind. But, since we are committed to the same path, why not finally join forces? That is the whole question of our future relations, the very question we were raising a moment ago regarding the *significatio passiva.* It was sufficient, yet necessary, to build upon what we had learnt in *grammatica speculativa* in order to follow the admirable developments of the great theosophist Ibn 'Arabî concerning the *meaning* of the divine names. A simple example that allows me to say that if one is not already somewhat initiated into the secret of the *significatio passiva*, one runs the risk of groping in the dark and letting the essential slip away. Allow me to refer here to my book on Ibn 'Arabî[4]. Here, in a nutshell, is what was my guiding idea in the books that constitute my work as a seeker in the philosophical and religious sciences.

3. It will therefore be easy for you, my dear Philippe Némo, to understand why I could not and did not wish to be a 'historian' in the usual sense of the word, a scholar who takes stock of the past but feels no responsibility whatsoever for it; not even responsible for *the meaning*

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[4] *The Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabî,* op. cit., *(Translator's note)*

he gives it, when it is he who gives that past one meaning or another and sets ‘historical causality’ in motion in accordance with the meaning he has decided upon. For the historian, facts are past, events become the past, whilst he, the historian, was not there. For it is fitting that the historian should not be there, where and when it happened. It is even necessary – it is said – that he not be there, that he never make an ‘appearance’ in that past in order to be able to speak of it with complete ‘historical objectivity’.

Although he lavishes terms such as ‘living past’ or ‘presence of the past’, that presence is nothing more than a harmless metaphor for his personal alibi. In contrast, the hermeneutic phenomenologist must always be there (*Dasein)*, because for him nothing is ever past or overcome. It is by making his presence felt that he brings to light what lies hidden beneath the apparent phenomenon. This act of presence consists in opening up, in bringing forth the future hidden by the supposedly overcome past. It is seeing it before oneself, and this is something entirely different from a metaphorical and harmless literary presence of the ‘living past’. For it is feeling ‘responsible for the past’ because one takes on the future. This implies a certain way of being, no doubt, but the very way of being that conditions that hermeneutic level. (Ways of being cannot be dialectically called into question. They are understood, they are rejected, but they are not refuted.) That is why I have always remained the phenomenologist I was in my youth. I know that this may have baffled some of my fellow Orientalists, who are more or less well-informed about the demands of the philosopher. But as the state of research has required me to become a critical editor of several volumes of Arabic and Persian texts, I have thus demonstrated that a philosopher can combine the duties of philological scholarship with the demands of philosophical understanding. That is why I have been better understood by philosophers, who have grasped my purpose from the outset. But here the consequences of the poverty of our official curricula make themselves felt. One must begin by making known the names of distant philosophers, the discrepancies in periodisation, the list of technical terms, etc.—all things that ought to be commonplace, and which perhaps will be one day, when philosophers of the West and the East have together taken up the thread of their tradition.

I must say that the course of my research originated in the incomparable analysis we owe to Heidegger, which reveals the ontological roots of historical science and shows that there exists a more original, more primitive historicity than what is called universal history, the history of external events, the *Weltgeschichte*—in short, history in the ordinary and common sense of the word. To signify this, I coined the term *‘historicality’*, and I believe the term should be retained. The relationship between ‘historiality’ and ‘historicity’ is the same as that between *‘existential’* and *‘existential’*. That was a decisive moment. It seemed to me, in fact, that this ‘historiality’ motivates and legitimises the refusal to allow ourselves *to be inserted* into the historicity of History, into the fabric of historical causality, and that it calls upon us to tear ourselves away from the historicity of History. For if there is a ‘sense of history’, it does not, in any case, lie in the historicity of historical events; it lies in that *‘historiality’*, in those secret, esoteric *existential* roots of History and the historical.

If that moment was decisive, it is because it was undoubtedly also the moment when, taking Heidegger’s analytics as my guide, I found myself compelled to explore hermeneutical dimensions that his programme had not yet envisaged. This is what I have subsequently termed *‘hierohistory’*, or sacred history, which does not refer at all to the external events of a ‘sacred history’ or a ‘history of salvation’, but to something more original, namely, the esoteric hidden beneath the phenomenon of literal appearance, that of the narratives in the Holy Books. I have just pointed out the contrast between *historicity* and *historicality.* Now, this is a contrast already perfectly

, though expressed in other terms, among the Gnostics and Kabbalists of the religions of the Book.

Our Jewish Kabbalist friends, for example, speak of the mysteries of the primordial Torah, of the Torah-Sophia, which contains the archetypes of Creation that the Holy One—blessed be He—contemplated for millennia before creating the worlds. But it was not the story of the first man, the story of Korah, or that of Balaam's donkey, which, beneath their literal appearance, occupied his meditation; it was not with these that he created the worlds. What he contemplated was the *neshamah*, the most intimate spiritual centre of the Torah and of man, of the Torah as it exists on the level of the supreme world, the world of *Atsilut.* And it is this that spiritual hermeneutics teaches us to read in the Bible. Similarly, for the Shi'ite, Twelver and Ismaili Gnostics, what we laypeople call historicity and historical meaning is, for them, nothing but the figure and metaphor (*majâz)* of the true reality (*haqîqat)* of metaphysical events and persons, prior to the creation of our world. And *this* is what spiritual hermeneutics, the *ta'wîl*, teaches us to read in the Qur'an. If it were not exactly *that* – and this is what the Fifth Imam of the Shiites, Imam Mohammad Bâqir (8th century), formulated decisively – if there were nothing but the literal appearance relating to the circumstances of the revelation of the Qur'anic verses, that is to say, if there were nothing but the historical, the Qur'an would long since have been a dead book. Now, that book is alive until the Day of Resurrection, and if it is alive, it is because of the spiritual hermeneutics that continually unveils its hidden meanings anew. Here, then, is phenomenological hermeneutics traced back to its theological origins.

Then, the height of irony! What the uninitiated, the exotericists, regard as the metaphorical meaning is precisely what the Gnostics regard as the true meaning, for they never reduce the spiritual meaning to the rank of a metaphor or an allegory. And what the layman takes for the true meaning, the visible historical meaning, is for the Gnostics nothing but the metaphorical meaning, the metaphor of true reality. Thus, our historical science and our historians are reduced to metaphors and the metaphorical state. And what of the exegetical theologians of our day who want nothing to do with any meaning other than the so-called 'historical' one, and who destroy hierohistory by forcing it at any cost into the historicity of History, since for them there is no other 'reality'? At best, one will arrive at a typology as inoffensive as it is unconvincing. Perhaps I have not had many precursors to make these comparisons, but they seem indispensable to me, as they allow us to better judge the possibility that Heideggerian analytics may have become immobilised in premature interruptions.

The 'hierohistoricity' of hierohistory, by distancing us from the historicity of History, allows us to view with irony the current obsession with the historical and historicity that prevails in our times. There are 'historical keys', 'historical colloquia', proposals for historical laws, 'historical turns', and so on. Hierohistory teaches us that there are affiliations more essential and true than historical ones, so essential indeed that the privilege accorded to the latter by those 'blind to the invisible' seems ridiculous. It is not through a 'historical' bond that we connect with the other worlds that give 'meaning' to this world. Heideggerian analysis is of particular interest, amongst other things, in helping us understand the reasons why humanity today clings to 'the historical' as the only 'real' thing. One gets the impression of a

secularisation of the idea of the Incarnation, which draws even theologians into the wake of a generalised and omnipresent sociology.

However, the analysis of the act of presence, of *Dasein*, in which the future of the past emerges, by 'acting out' what was yet to come in the past, should have the virtue of freeing us from the mirage of this passion for historicity—which is the passion for creating a 'past' to which one will have the glory of belonging—precisely because it dispels the mirage of the idea of the past by transfiguring it.

Let us return to the unprecedented vocabulary with which Heidegger has confronted us in order to pose the question: do acts of human presence simply pass into the past? Or do they remain in the present, in the sense that *they are* having been? But if *they are*, it is because the presence that performs the 'act of presence' is always yet to come, a future that never ceases to become the present (*Gegenwärtigendes-Zukunftiges).* The having-been cannot presently be having-been (*Gewesenheit)* except by ceaselessly emerging from the future. There is no present except because the future ceases not to become having-been (*Gewesend).* The present is this: it is the future having-been-to-come, but because the future *is* having-been, it retains in the present all its virtualities and possibilities. Everything depends on the 'act of presence' (*da-sein)* by which having-been *is* there *(da-gewesen).* That is the process of the temporalisation of time. But then one would have to draw a comparison with the profound insights of the Iranian theosophers regarding this process. And one would have to begin with pre-Islamic Iran: everything connected with Zervanism. In Islamic Iran, Semnânî (14th century) distinguishes between *zamân âfâqî*, the 'temporality of horizons', that is, the time of the macrocosm, of the physical universe, and *zamân anfosî*, the temporality of souls, that is, psycho-spiritual time. Qâzî Sa'îd Qommî (17th century) distinguishes between an opaque and dense temporality (*zamân kathîf)*, a subtle temporality (*latîf)* and an absolutely subtle temporality (*altaf).* I have had occasion to discuss this in my books[5].

What I have just suggested enables me to explain how the endeavour of the young philosopher Sohravardî, in the 12th century, in deliberately setting out in the midst of an Islamised Iran to 'revive the theosophy of the Light of the Sages of ancient Persia', would not have appeared to me in all its dazzling *splendour* had I not been shaped and informed by this phenomenology. To the historian as such, the Sohravardian project may appear to be 'mental speculation', to use the term in common parlance, an arbitrary project without historical foundation. But Sohravardî himself neither acted nor thought as a 'historian'. He does not deliberate on discernible or debatable concepts, influences or historical traces. *He is* simply there: he makes his presence felt. He takes on the past of ancient Zoroastrian Iran, thereby bringing it into the present. It is no longer a past without a future, all material connection having been severed. He restores its future to that past, a future that begins by being itself because it feels responsible for that past. Defying any rupture in the historical continuum, the spiritual bond is strong enough to constitute, in and of itself, a legitimate connection. Henceforth,

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[5] See in particular *En Islam iranien,* op. cit., vol. I, pp. 135–185 and vol. IV, General Index, S.V. *(Translator's note)*

the sages of ancient Persia, the *Khosrovânîyûn*, are in truth the precursors of the *Ishrâqîyûn* (the Platonists) of Islamic Iran. “I have had no precursor,” writes Shaykh al-Ishrâq, “for this task.”

Undoubtedly, the boldness of a young thinker aged thirty-five, whose act of presence (*da-sein)* brings about and legitimises the transformation of the past into the future, for it is the entire future of that past that is reconstituted as the present, within the present of his 'act of presence'. And this is what *is historically true.*

The young Shaykh al-Ishrâq, Sohravardî, has long been, in my eyes, the exemplary hero of philosophy. It is the entire spiritual culture of Iran that I have strived to understand following his example, in order to reveal its full, as yet undiscovered dimension. Perhaps I have helped more than one Iranian friend, known or unknown, to find themselves. More than once I have received testimony to this effect, and such testimonies have always impressed me. But I am convinced that this act of presence must be carried out by anyone who wishes to convey to the West a message such as that of the Iranian spiritual masters. I believe I cannot offer a clearer testimony in support of what I said earlier regarding what I have retained of Heidegger throughout my entire career as a seeker. And this should suffice to dispel once and for all the serious misunderstanding I have already denounced, at least to the extent that this misunderstanding was in good faith.

4. The observation has long been made: in reality, analytics—the practical application of Heideggerian hermeneutics—thus tacitly posits a philosophical stance, a conception of the world, a *Weltanschauung.* This stance is foreshadowed on the horizon against which the analytics of *the Da* of *Dasein* unfolds. But it is by no means necessary to adhere to that tacit *Weltanschauung* in order to put into practice all the resources of an analytics of that *Da-sein,* which I just a moment ago translated as 'making an appearance'. If the *Weltanschauung* does not coincide with Heidegger's, this will mean that the *Da* of *Dasein* will be given another *situs,* another dimension, distinct from that of *Sein und Zeit.* I compared it earlier to the key used to open a lock. This key is hermeneutics. It is up to us to shape this key to fit the lock we wish to open. The examples I recalled a moment ago show us that, thus adapted, this *hermeneutical key* opens all the locks that bar access to the veiled, the hidden, the esoteric. It is with the *hermeneutical key* that Swedenborg unlocks the mysteries of the *Arcana coelestia* of the Bible.

This key is, so to speak, the principal tool in the phenomenologist's mental laboratory. But making use of this *hermeneutical key*—because Heidegger has shown how it can be used and adapted—does not in any way require or imply that one must agree with Heidegger's worldview, his *Weltanschauung*. Now, those who have insinuated that I had 'mixed' Heidegger with Sohravardî were not referring to this *hermeneutic key*, of which, moreover, they had no knowledge; they sought to insinuate that I had engaged in some sort of syncretism between Heidegger's *Weltanschauung* and that of the Iranian philosophers. The insinuation is so absurd that I have questioned their good faith. Precisely, I have made use of the *hermeneutical key* and have written pages upon pages to highlight the differences between them. To what end? Superficial critics do not read them and persist in their ineptitude.

As an example of my efforts to highlight the differences and prevent any confusion, I shall refer to the work of one of the greatest Iranian philosophers, Mulla Sadra Shirazi (17th century), the great hermeneutist of Sohravardi's *Ishrâq*. I have dealt with Mollâ Sadrâ in several of my books; I have published and translated one of his treatises in its entirety and have taught several courses on his works, both in Paris and in Tehran. Mollâ Sadrâ is the author of a veritable revolution as a metaphysician within traditional Islamic philosophy. He was the first to undermine the venerable metaphysics of Essence, replacing it with a metaphysics that grants the act of existing—existence itself—priority and primacy over Essence. It took no more for me to hear students and researchers in Tehran proclaim with conviction that Mollâ Sadrâ was the true founder of existentialism! Others, impressed by Mollâ Sadrâ's cosmogony and grandiose psychology, proudly found there what they had assimilated—for better or worse—from evolutionism. However, the Johannine reminiscence found in Mollâ Sadrâ and so many other Islamic philosophers—'Nothing ascends to heaven except that which has descended from heaven'—is completely foreign to evolutionism. The philosophy of the Active Imagination as a purely spiritual power, in Molla Sadra, might perhaps warrant some comparison with Bergson's **Matter and Memory** and **Spiritual Energy**. But the eschatological horizon of our Iranian philosophers is not a Bergsonian horizon.

So, I had to make ever greater efforts and keep trying again and again to avoid these misunderstandings, which undermine any serious attempt at comparative philosophy. And I did so by employing the *hermeneutic key*, that is, by showing that, despite some points of agreement, a fundamental difference remained, such as that to which we referred in the modes of understanding (*modi intelligendi)* arising from entirely different modes of being *(modi essendi)*. It had to be shown that the respective perspectives corresponded to different hermeneutical levels. Furthermore, when publishing and translating a work by Mollâ Sadrâ, *The Book of Metaphysical Penetrations*, I had had the opportunity to dwell at length on the particularities of the vocabulary of being in Greek and Latin, in Arabic and Persian, in French and German. Undoubtedly, the 12th-century Toledo translators, whom I mentioned earlier, have provided us with the elements of an Arabic-Latin philosophical vocabulary that includes the words *mâhîya (quidditas, essentia), wojûd (esse, existere), mawjûd (ens)*, etc. One need only refer to it to understand that there is no trace in Mollâ Sadrâ of what has been termed in France 'existentialism', that is to say, nothing of the philosophy of existence that has adopted that name, for in both cases the modes of being that underpin the primacy conferred upon 'existence' are radically different. This is regardless of the judgement expressed by Heidegger himself regarding "existentialism", a word that the early Heideggerians would never have uttered.

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[6] For Corbin's writings on Mollâ Sadrâ, see in particular **En Islam iranien**, op. cit., vol. 4, pp. 54–122; **La philosophie iranienne islamique aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles**, Buchet-Chastel, Paris, 1981, pp. 49–82; *History of Islamic Philosophy,* Trotta, Madrid, 1994, pp. 303–306; as well as Corbin's annotated and introduced translation of Mollâ Sadrâ, *Le livre des pénétrations métaphysiques,* Verdier, Lagrasse, 1988. *(Translators' note)*

[7] See previous note. *(Translator's note)*

This brings us to the fundamental difference from which the transition—'my transition'—from Heidegger to Sohravardî arises, a difference with which I should like to conclude.

I have just shown how the use of the *hermeneutic key* that Heidegger has placed in our hands does not in any way imply an adherence to his *Weltanschauung*. Hermeneutics proceeds from the act of meaningful presence in the *Da* of *Dasein;* its task is therefore to illuminate how, by understanding itself, human presence situates itself, circumscribes the *Da*, the *locus* of its presence, and reveals the horizon that was hitherto hidden from it. The metaphysics of the *Ishrâqîyûn*, par excellence that of Mulla Sadra, culminates in a metaphysics of Presence (*hozûr)*. In Heidegger, the entire ambiguity of human finitude—characterised as 'being-towards-death' *(Sein zum Tode)*—is organised around this *situs.* In Mollâ Sadrâ, in Ibn 'Arabî, presence as they experience it in this world, as it is revealed to them by 'the phenomenon of the world' they inhabit, is not a presence whose end is death, a being-towards-death, but a *'being-towards-beyond-death'*, so to speak: *Sein zum Jenseits des Todes.* It is immediately apparent that the conception of the world, the pre-existential philosophical stance, whether in Heidegger or in our Iranian theosophers, is a constitutive element of *the Da* of *Dasein*, of the act of presence to the world and its variants. From there, one need only define this notion of Presence as precisely as possible. To what is human presence present?

The investigation will naturally begin with the epistemology of the *Ishrâqîyûn.* According to them, there is a formal knowledge (*'ilm sûrî)* which is ordinary knowledge; it is produced through a *re-presentation,* a *species,* actualised in the soul. And there is a form of knowledge they designate as *presential* knowledge *('ilm hozûrî),* which does not pass through the mediation of a *representation,* of a *species,* but is immediate presence, that by which the act of presence of the soul brings about the presence of things and they become present to it, no longer as objects, but as presences. It is the knowledge they also call 'Eastern' knowledge *('ilm ishrâqî),* which is at once the rising of the East of being upon the soul and the rising of the soul's morning light upon the things it reveals, revealing itself as co-presences. It is important always to retain the primary meaning of the word *Ishrâq*, that of the rising and dawn of the star, the star in its East. But this is an East that is not to be sought on our geographical maps; it is the Light that rises, a Light prior to all revealed things, to all presence, since it is this Light that reveals them, that *brings* about Presence.

So, the crux of the matter lies in this question: to which presences does human presence make itself present when it makes its presence felt? In other words: with which constellations of presences does the *Da* of *Dasein* surround itself when it reveals itself? To which worlds is it present by being *there?* Should I confine myself to the phenomenon of the world analysed in **Sein und Zeit*?* Or should I sense, accept and amplify my presence in all worlds and inter-worlds, just as they are discovered and revealed to me by the 'Eastern' Presence of our Islamic theosophists from Iran? In posing this question, I am merely illustrating the difference I raised a moment ago. If Heidegger teaches us to analyse the *Da* of *Dasein*, the act of presence, this does not in any way imply, as can be seen, that we must impose the limits of the Heideggerian horizon upon this act of presence, nor that it should be prematurely immobilised. That is why I referred to

the decisive moment when I was drawn towards hermeneutic levels not anticipated by the Heideggerian analysis I had at my disposal at the time.

I am referring to a dimension of the act of presence in which we find ourselves in the company of both the divine hierarchies of the great Neoplatonist Proclus and those of Jewish Gnosticism, Valentinian Gnosticism, and Islamic Gnosticism. From that moment on, it is also the future and the dimension of the future that are determined. If the act of presence is the future that ceaselessly constitutes itself in the present, if it depends on this act of presence to constitute my ever-to-come self in the present, what is that future? Here one cannot evade the choice, the philosophical option latent since before the hermeneutic journey, for that choice is decisive: hermeneutics does nothing but reveal it.

Indeed, on the one hand, we hear the poignant refrain of Heideggerian analysis: to be *free for death.* On the other, the firm invitation to a *freedom beyond death.* Let us focus on the word *Entschlossenheit:* resolute decision. Today, this translates as a decision *without retreat.* And that is even better. For the question is to what extent such a resolution would not be a *retreat* in the face *of* death, an inability to be *free beyond death*, to make oneself present in and beyond death. I fear, in fact, that, having fallen victim to widespread agnosticism, humanity today feels incapable *of facing* the *freedom* beyond death. We have ingeniously built up every possible barrier: psychoanalysis, historicism, etc.; everything has been put into practice to forbid us any vision or meaning *beyond.* Even an infinitely evolved humanity, at the end of the hundreds of millennia imagined by Franz Werfel in his poignant and immense novel, *Stern der Ungeborenen (The Star of the Unborn*[8]*)*, cannot help but fall outside the circle of the eternal initiates, the 'chronosophers', *on this side*, too fragile and too old to bear the weight of its future *beyond.* And that is ultimately the metaphysical meaning of the word *'West':* the twilight, the setting sun, the meaning that Sohravardî characterised in his brief and poignant *'Tale of the Western Exile'*[9]. Perhaps one day I shall explain how that *'Tale of the Western Exile'* was precisely the decisive moment when I rejected the weight of the finitudes that weigh beneath the gloomy sky of Heideggerian freedom. I had to realise that, beneath that gloomy sky, the *Da* of *Dasein* was an islet of perdition, precisely the islet of the 'Western exile'.

People reassure themselves by repeating that 'death is part of life'. This is not true, unless life is understood solely in the biological sense. But biological life derives from another life which is its source and which is independent of it, which is essential Life. Insofar as the resolute decision remains simply 'free-for-death', death presents itself as a closure, not as an *exitus*, a *departure* from this world towards other worlds. But it is the living, not the dead, who depart from this world.

In the course of this brief conversation, I hope to have succeeded in explaining how the philosopher can be both the first French translator of Heidegger and the hermeneutist of the Iranian *res religiosa*. That is to say, to have explained everything I owe to the tools provided by Heidegger's hermeneutics, and how and why I have made use of them to arrive at

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[8] Published in Spanish under the title **Los que no nacieron* (Translators' note)*

[9] "Account of Western Exile" in S.Y. Sohravardî, *The Encounter with the Angel,* op. cit., pp. 113–134. *(Translator's note)*

perspectives situated at other levels. I believe it was an experience entirely different from what the more or less successful cross-pollinations between Heidegger's philosophy and theology have represented.

One must also understand how, after my long years of pilgrimage to the East, far from Europe, it was difficult for me to reconnect with the person and philosophy of Heidegger.

P.N.: You have just mentioned Heidegger, whom you translated in 1938. You have highlighted the contrast between Heidegger's hermeneutics of *Dasein* and that which the philosophers and mystics of Iran enabled you to discover. You gauge the extent of this contrast by referring to the meaning of the words 'East' and 'Eastern', as those philosophers use them. But should we understand that, after 1938, the continuation of Heidegger's works bears witness to a stagnation and a fixation on the positions he had then adopted? Should we understand that the second part of Heidegger's work, following the period of **Sein und Zeit** and **Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?**, has not altered in any way the 'closure' that you observed in the first part of his work?

H.C.: Careful! I would not for the world use the word 'closure' in relation to a philosopher who has taught us to unlock so many locks of Being! But the question you posed to me concerned my own case: what have Heidegger's work and thought meant for a scholar known at the same time, or since then, as an interpreter of Iranian Islamic philosophy, which remains *terra incognita* in the West. I have tried to answer your question as best I could, and of course in relation to Heidegger's work as it stood in 1938 and which already carried some weight. The question you are now posing to me concerns the entirety of his work. To answer it would require a full comparative study of that work against the whole of Iranian Islamic philosophy. Perhaps such a task might be conceivable one day, but I admit that, for the moment, it is beyond me. I still have much to do in the field of Iranian philosophers, precisely so that such comparative research may one day be possible. This task must be undertaken by our young philosopher colleagues; on the one hand, those who have kept in touch with Heidegger's later work—a connection I have inevitably lost during my long years in the East; and, on the other, the young philosophers—whether my students or not—whom I have encouraged to study Arabic and Persian on their own, so that they may act as philosophers to bring Islamic philosophy and theosophy out of the ghetto of what has come to be called 'Orientalism'.

The scope of Heidegger's work was, as is well known, considerable. We are told that a complete edition is in the pipeline which, including seminar texts, will comprise some seventy volumes. This is very much in keeping, then, with the massive works of our Eastern philosophers. There are, consequently, good prospects for work, for possibilities, for unlimited 'potential' to be grasped. It is time to repeat: philosophers, to your task! In any case, I think it useful to offer a testimony in response to a question I have often heard posed and which perhaps presents a puzzle. The question concerns the fate of what would have been the second part of **Sein und Zeit**, a second

part without which the first is like the ascending curve of an architectural arch, deprived of the descending curve, and which would undoubtedly have crowned the ontological edifice of *historicity*.

Now, I was able to see the manuscript of that second part with my own eyes on Heidegger's desk in July 1936, in Freiburg. It was contained in a large folder. Heidegger even told me to pick it up to weigh it, and it really was very heavy.

What happened to that manuscript afterwards? There have been conflicting accounts; I myself cannot provide one.

I return to your question. Just as one cannot speak of a 'closure' in Heidegger's philosophical trajectory, neither does the development of his work allow us to speak of a halt, of a fixation. In reality, that is not the issue. The issue is whether, throughout that unfolding, Heideggerian analytics, put into practice in multiple ways, maintains the underlying tacit presuppositions of a *Weltanschauung* discernible from the outset. Does analysing being-towards-death as the anticipation of the possibility for the human being to form a finished whole imply, or not, a philosophy of life and death? I believe that for the 'Eastern' philosophers I have mentioned, the idea of such a *completion* reveals, on the contrary, an acceptance of *the incompletion* of a being condemned to fall *back upon* itself. That is why I have preferred to speak of a hermeneutics of human existence that prematurely fixates on a completion which is in reality always unfinishable without a forward-moving impulse (*vorlaufen)* that is an impulse *beyond.*

P.N.: I would like to ask you one final question. You have highlighted the contrast between the horizon of Heidegger's analytics and the 'Eastern' horizon. However, whilst it is true that in Heidegger there is no place for the notion of God—since God is, for him, assimilable to a metaphysical concept, that of the Supreme Being— there is nevertheless a place in Heidegger for the dimension of the sacred, for a difference which he calls the ontological difference between Being and being, that is to say, for the difference between two worlds: the eternal world above and a provisional world below. Might this not, then, be the means for a convergence between Heidegger's thought and religious thought?

H.C.: I have the impression, my dear Philippe Némo, that the question, as you put it, would tend to make Heidegger into a great Platonist. You would thus be setting out on a treacherous path, where one would have to watch every step. I am not sure I can follow you down that road. Let us first recall that one could say the 'Eastern' dimension was at least sensed by Heidegger, even if it is not exactly the 'East' in the sense understood by the *ishrâqîyûn*, the 'Platonists of Persia'. You yourself must be aware of Heidegger's surprising statements regarding the *Upanishads*, which allow us to sense that this was, at heart, something of the sort he was seeking. That said, let us acknowledge that the relationship between Being and entity is not equivalent to the relationship between the world above and the world below. It is not enough to set a world of Being against the world of entity in order to access the sacred. The world of the entity does not *in itself* signify the transitory and provisional world, for all the universes of the Gods and Angels are eternal universes of the entity. On the other hand, you put your finger on something essential when you recall that for Heidegger the concept of God is the metaphysical concept of the Supreme Entity *(Ens Supremum, Summum Ens),* and that he, like others, saw his difficulty in asking himself what

relationship that *Summum Ens* could have with *non-being, nihil,* nothingness, when it is said that the *ens creatum* is created *ex nihilo,* out of nothing, by the *Ens increatum.*

Here we come up against a fundamental difficulty, one so profound, in fact, that it calls into question the very meaning of monotheism. It was observed by Islamic theosophists with greater attention, I believe, than by anyone else, given that the entire horizon of Islamic thought and spirituality is dominated by *tawhîd*, the affirmation of the One. What, then, of this One?

This can lead to catastrophic confusion. It has been lucidly exposed by our mystical theosophers in Iran, who have highlighted the confusion made by many Sufis and, following them, by more than one Orientalist. It is the confusion between the *Esse* or the Being (in Arabic, *wojûd)* and the *ens* or the entity (in Arabic, *mawjûd).* Here, we are undoubtedly on the fringes of Heidegger's thought. In Islamic theosophy, Ibn 'Arabî (13th century) forcefully articulated the difference between theological *tawhîd* (*olûhî*) and ontological *tawhîd* (*wojûdî*). Theological *tawhîd*, which is exoteric, affirms the Oneness of God as the *Ens supremum*, the Entity that dominates all other entities. Ontological *tawhîd*, which is esoteric, affirms the transcendental oneness of Being. Being or the *esse*, in its essence, is one and unique. The entities that Being actualises in its act of being are, by essence, multiple. The one and only Being is the one and only Divinity, unknowable in the deepest recesses of its mystery; it is the *Absconditum* that can only be outlined, and from afar, by apophatic or negative theology. It is knowable positively only in its theophanies: theophany is therefore essential for affirmative theology to be possible. Precisely for this reason, if the Divinity is one and unique, the gods—that is, the divine names, the divine figures, the theophanic figures—are manifold. None can fulfil the functions of the Supreme Cause. To confuse one of these necessary figures with the one and only Divinity is tantamount to establishing a single idol in the place of the others, and monotheism perishes in its victory. To affirm the unity of *the Esse*, the unique *Esse* being Divinity itself, is to affirm its essence, but this never and in no way amounts to affirming the unity of the Being. It would be monstrous to say that there is nothing but a single entity. It would be a metaphysical nihilism that reality itself refutes.[10] If God is conceived as *the Summum Ens*, the *Ens unicum*, the One Entity, all other entities sink into undifferentiation and nothingness; the entire ordering of Being within the hierarchy of entities vanishes. That is perhaps the illusion with which many pseudo-mystics have intoxicated themselves, and what some interpreters in the West have designated as 'existential monism', without realising that this term implied a *contradictio in adjecto*, for the existential is essentially multiple. As for the relationship between the *Esse unicum* and the *entia* (in reality transcending that *Unicum* to *the Esse* that it brings into being in the entities), it was originally formulated most aptly by the great philosopher Proclus: it is the relationship between the Henada of the henads and the hierarchies of entities that monadises them by bringing them into being. There is in fact no being-entity other than each time as *a* being (be it *a* God, *an* Angel, *a* man, a species, *a* constellation, etc.). *Ens et unum convertuntur*. That is why our great speculative theosophers ("speculative" in the sense of the word *speculum*, "mirror") have always maintained that the active subject of *tawhîd* was the One Himself. He is the Unifier. It is He who makes of every being, of each one of us, a being, a unique one of which He is

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[10] On this subject, which is briefly discussed here and which was of deep concern to the author, see H. Corbin, 'On Apophatic Theology as an Antidote to Nihilism', in *The Paradox of Monotheism,* Losada, Madrid, 2003, pp. 233–289, *(Translator's note)*

respectively, the One. This is what the mystic Hallâj expressed by saying: "The aspiration of the One is that the One should make him unique".

In this way, we may have strayed quite far from Being and the entity in Heidegger. But only in appearance, for it is the question you have put to me that has led us to evoke this theosophical aspect of the metaphysics of Being, in which Ibn 'Arabî remains our great master. Let us see: I have just said that theophany (*tajallî ilâhî)* is essential—theophany in multiple forms corresponding to each of those to whom and for whom it *manifests* itself. But the personal, theophanic God need not assume the functions of the Supreme Cause, which is the *Absconditum*. From this confusion, with its political backdrop, monotheism is saved only by the esoteric paradox of the One-Many. Existentially, we might say that it is man who reveals himself to himself as something (someone) like God. Theologically, it is God who reveals himself to man. Speculative mystical theosophy overcomes the dilemma by making the simultaneous truth of the two terms inseparable. By revealing himself to man, the personalised God of personal theosophy reveals man to himself, and by revealing man to himself, he reveals him to himself and reveals himself to himself. On both sides, the eye that looks is simultaneously the eye that is looked at. Every theophany (from the lowest degree of mental vision) is fulfilled in the simultaneity of these two aspects. Perhaps we have here something akin to a transcended Neoplatonism, but this transcendence is the work of Ibn ‘Arabî rather than Heidegger. Undoubtedly, there remains much important research to be carried out along this path. But in the meantime, the impression I retain is that formulated by one of our colleagues, I believe Pierre Trotignon: Heideggerian hermeneutics leaves us with the impression of a theology without theophany.

P.N.: Of course, further research is needed, because there is, moreover, this theme of the Word, which was essentially introduced in the modern era by Heidegger, but which fits so well with tradition—especially the biblical tradition—of the Word of God, and here we are within the tradition of the sacred. Whether that sacred element takes the name of God or simply that of Being, what ultimately matters is the ontological difference itself, the difference between Being and the entity, just as for religions there is a difference between a world above and a world below. If we then take that difference in and of itself, do we not find a unity of inspiration between Heidegger and what remains of the world of religions?

H.C.: I fully understand your concern. Your question leads us to ask ourselves about the relationship between the *Logos* of onto-logy and the *Logos* of the-ology, or, rather, the *Logos* of all theologies of the religions of the Book. I recalled earlier that adage common to our mystical theosophers, which is nothing other than a reminiscence of the Gospel of John (3:13): ‘Nothing ascends to heaven except that which descended from heaven’. Has the *Logos* of Heideggerian analytics come down from heaven in order to ascend to it? Well, I believe this is how I symbolise his search for a common inspiration between Heidegger and what remains of the world of religions. But, whilst we can analyse without too much effort the processes of secularisation that have desacralised the sacred, we have scarcely any evidence of a re-sacralisation of the secularised. Without

doubt, we observe a frequent promotion of the secularised, granting it the privileges and prerogatives of what was once sacred. That is in reality nothing but a demonic caricature.

Metaphysical secularisation is compatible only with the death of the Gods, not with their resurrection. We must therefore focus all our efforts on the word 'resurrection'. All the meanings it carries imply the rupture of a well-ordered system of things: a tearing away, an emergence from the tomb. The resurrection is then announced to us: through the mystery of the empty tomb. In contrast, the secularisations of our day, by caricaturing the sacred, take pleasure in the pseudo-worship of the inhabited tomb. And I believe that the herald of all resurrection is, par excellence, the Word, the Word of sovereign divine resonance.

On the other hand, it is highly pertinent how your question leads us to the theme of the Word, to the biblical tradition of the divine Word. There is undoubtedly a theme of the Word in Heidegger. But let us not forget that in this domain, our Jewish Kabbalist friends, as well as the Kabbalists of Christianity and Islam, have been and continue to be, for centuries, our finest teachers and guides. They have admirably analysed the phenomenon of the Word: how the Word becomes a Book, how the written Word is resurrected as the living Word. By comparison, the theme of the Word in Heidegger strikes me as marred by ambiguity: is it a twilight —a twilight that would be the secularisation of the Word?— or is it a dawn heralding palingenesis, the resurrection of the Word of the biblical tradition? The answer will depend on one's perspective, and the discernible options within those answers lead me to think that, just as Hegel's philosophy gave rise to a right-wing Hegelianism and a left-wing Hegelianism, the question you raise may lead Heidegger's philosophy, *willy-nilly*, to give rise to a right-wing Heideggerianism and a left-wing one.

But what seems essential to me at the moment, and what I also feel attests to the coherence of our conversation, is that your question brings us back to what was our starting point. Indeed, I began with the idea of hermeneutics in Heidegger, recalling its theological origins. Now your question about the Word, which lies at the heart of hermeneutics, brings us back to those origins. We thus close the hermeneutic circle together, and that is a good sign.

I believe that my own experience, as I have attempted to describe it, is in line with the concern implied by your question, insofar as Heideggerian hermeneutics, which has its distant roots in Schleiermacher, had been for me the threshold opening onto an integral hermeneutics. Let us clarify the outlines further. I do not believe that the four harmless senses accepted by mainstream medieval exegesis have the power to lead us, to a level of being not yet sensed, to a hermeneutical adventure 'without retreat' or return. Instead, there is a hermeneutics of the Word, granted to the religions of the Book, which has always possessed, by its very nature, the power to produce an elevation, an exit, an *ek-stasis* towards those other invisible worlds that give *true meaning* to our own, to our 'phenomenon of the world'. I think, in Christianity, of the great Gnostic Valentinus, of Joachim of Fiore, Sebastian Franck, Jacob Boehme, Swedenborg, F.C. Oetinger and so many others; witnesses who, together with their esoteric brotherhoods of Judaism and Islam, confirm that the phenomenon of the Holy Book, far from stifling the development and initiative of thought, is its most vivid stimulus.

Now, just as others have spoken of the need for a ‘permanent necessity’, I shall advocate the need for a ‘permanent hermeneutics’. Of course, by this I do not mean an accommodation to historical and archaeological discoveries, which all too often lead to reducing the ‘historical narrative’ of the Holy Book to the banal dimensions of events for which a sociological explanation is already at hand, eliminating certain superfluous words of somewhat troublesome sacredness. No, permanent hermeneutics does not alter a single word of Tradition; every word must be preserved, for it contributes to a dazzling new encounter between the Image and the Idea.

But would Heidegger have followed us in this endeavour, which seeks to transform the Logos of his ontology into a theological Logos? When he had to confront philosophy and theology (one of his articles bears this title), in what sense did he effect such a conversion? And, first and foremost, who should be the *Theos?* I have tried to say so. But the uncertainty we may face regarding his eventual answer is secondary. A Heideggerian ‘orthodoxy’ is out of place, and we must continue our task as we envisage it. Perhaps in his unpublished works or in some recorded conversation there lies a clue to an answer. But perhaps, too, he has taken the secret with him forever.

That is why I prefer to say today, simply, as they say in Arabic: *Ramat Allâh 'alay-hi:* May God’s mercy be upon him!

VIII

Biographical *postscript* to a philosophical conversation[1]

On rereading the text of my conversation with Philippe Némo, I have the impression that most of the essential questions that have occupied my life as a seeker have been addressed, albeit succinctly. There are gaps, of course, through which many further elaborations and explanations—by no means superfluous—might have been woven. But perhaps then the conversation would still be continuing...

Among these gaps are those where some clarifications could and should have been inserted, without which the stages of the spiritual journey, the phases of the 'curve of life', may not appear with sufficient clarity. I have alluded to my original training in philosophy. That a young philosophy student should encounter German philosophy is hardly surprising. That he should take the path of Islamic philosophy, in Arabic and Persian, is far more unexpected. That he should combine the two paths is already a rather rare occurrence. How did these encounters come about?

No one will be surprised that a philosophy student, having thoroughly studied the authors on the undergraduate syllabus, might be eager to explore new frontiers not included in the syllabus. Among these little-explored territories was medieval philosophy, the study of which was to be completely revitalised by the research and publications of Étienne Gilson. A dawn was breaking over this forgotten territory, whose light was enough to attract a student eager to broaden his philosophical horizons. It was in the academic year 1923–1924, if my memory serves me correctly, that Étienne Gilson began his incomparable teaching in the Section of Religious Sciences at the École Pratique des Hautes-Études. In any case, it was from that academic year onwards that I became his student.

I should like to set down once and for all the dazzling memory left upon me by the lectures of Étienne Gilson which I attended at that time for several years. His method did not consist of having some students translate a few lines of text and asking the others for their opinion, before finally offering his own commentary. Far from it! It was a time when students went to listen to the teacher, not to their peers, because they did not doubt that the teacher knew more than they did. Gilson would read the Latin texts, translate them himself, and then bring out all the content—whether explicit or latent—in a masterful commentary that got to the heart of the matter. He made such an impression on me and inspired such admiration that I decided to take him as my model, and, much later, I myself would attempt to apply this approach to Islamic philosophy and theology, endeavouring to offer the courses I would have liked to have attended as a student back then but which no one was teaching.

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[1] This text was written especially for the *Cahier de l'Herne: Henry Corbin,* op. cit. *(Translator's note)*

Among the texts examined by Étienne Gilson during those fruitful years were those translated from Arabic into Latin by the School of Toledo in the 12th century, foremost among them Avicenna's famous work: **Liber sextus Naturalium**, to which Gilson's commentary lent a unique depth. That was my first encounter with Islamic philosophy. In it I discovered the connection between cosmology and angelology, and I wondered whether there might be scope to explore other aspects of the latter; I believe that this interest in angelology has never left me throughout my life[2].

But in the meantime, a first task seemed unavoidable. To go further, it was necessary to turn to the texts oneself. And to turn to the texts oneself, it was necessary to set about studying Arabic. Moreover, Gilson himself encouraged me to do so. Thus, from the start of the 1926–1927 academic year, turning my back on the agrégation, I set out for the École Nationale des Langues Orientales. This was by no means, at that time, the great 'machine' it has become today. The small building on Rue de Lille had the intimate feel of a school, almost exactly as Silvestre de Sacy had left it. There were no more than a handful of students for each language, and my colleague and friend Georges Vajda and I were almost the only philosophers lost in that venerable institution. It was this entry into the School of Oriental Languages that paved the way for my appointment at the National Library, where I was employed as an orientalist from November 1928. And it was this stint at the National Library that was to lead me, paradoxically, to my definitive escape to the East.

However, precisely during those same years there was another teaching capable of diverting a young and ardent philosopher from the conventional path of the official curricula. It was the teaching of Émile Bréhier. Even some fifty years on, one has the impression that the juxtaposition of the names of the two masters produces sparks. Émile Bréhier, who was, to some extent, the heir to the philosophical concepts of the *Enlightenment*, maintained that there is no such thing as Christian philosophy. The entire body of work by Étienne Gilson contradicted this, and it was difficult for us to emerge from a course on Duns Scotus, *the 'subtilis'*, and accept that there was no Christian philosophy. But how could one convince a perfect rationalist of the idea that the teachings of the Holy Scriptures can serve as a foundation for meditation and philosophical inquiry? If this is denied, there will no longer be any Jewish philosophy or Islamic philosophy. Nor is it even clear whether Meister Eckhart and Jacob Böhme would still have a place in the history of German philosophy. The paradox goes a little further, but it merely reflects one of those 'ways of being' we spoke of in the interview preceding this text, which no external human force can make yield.

Be that as it may, Émile Bréhier was then immersed in Plotinus' *Enneads*, the edition and translation of which he was preparing. In 1922–1923 he had delivered a masterclass at the Sorbonne on Plotinus and the *Upanishads*, and the courses of the following years drew on its implications.

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[2] Although references to angelology are ubiquitous in Corbin's work, the following may be particularly relevant as an overarching approach to the subject: H. Corbin, "The Necessity of Angelology", in *The Paradox of Monotheism,* op. cit., pp. 105–232. *(Translator's note)*

We pose the question once more: how could a young philosopher, eager for metaphysical adventure, have resisted the call to delve deeper into the influences or traces of Indian philosophy in the work of the founder of Neoplatonism? However, to do this, it was necessary to 'study' Sanskrit. But I had already decided to 'do' Arabic. How could I reconcile the two? I had to choose one or the other; that was the imperative advice of every philologist or linguist I consulted. But the philosopher has reasons that the philologist does not always understand. It fell to the philosopher to opt, in secret, of course, for the heroic solution: to begin studying both Arabic and Sanskrit at the same time. It was a famous period of mental asceticism, I can assure you. It could not be sustained for more than two years. I gained from it the benefit that if I have to read a book on Indian or Buddhist philosophy today, the Sanskrit technical terms interspersed within are not entirely alien to me. But after two years I had to find, on the path to the East, the 'signpost' that pointed me in the decisive direction of a road of no return; from then on, my path would lie through Arabic and Persian texts.

It must be said that the philosopher, now a student of Arabic lost amongst the linguists, thought he would die of starvation, having nothing to sustain him but grammars and dictionaries. More than once, recalling the substantial nourishment provided by philosophy, I asked myself: what am I doing here? Where have I got myself into? There was, however, a refuge where the finest substance of Islamic spirituality was dispensed. That refuge was called Louis Massignon, who, from 1928 onwards, was to combine his teaching at the Collège de France with the direction of Islamic studies in the Section of Religious Sciences at our École des Hautes-Études. I could not have foreseen then that I would one day be called upon to succeed him in his chair. But the contrast between Étienne Gilson's methodical and rigorous lectures and those of Louis Massignon was 'fabulous'. Admittedly, at the start of the academic year the professor would distribute a syllabus, dividing a general topic into a certain number of lessons. But what were syllabuses for! A class would begin with one of those dazzling insights in which the great mystic Massignon was so prodigal. And then there would be a digression, and then another, and another... Eventually the lecture hall found itself bewildered and lost in the midst of the master's tangled discourse on British policy in Palestine...

But one had to see in this, and we all did, a necessary aspect of the passion with which Massignon burned. It was impossible to escape his influence. His fiery soul, his fearless penetration into the mysteries of the mystical life of Islam, where no one had yet ventured in that way, the nobility of his indignation at the villainies of this world—all this inevitably left its mark on the spirit of his young listeners. Certainly, as the years went by, it was impossible not to see in some of them vulnerabilities, certain cracks. In the twilight of his life, he was devastated when his friends could not follow him in his political choices. But this in no way alters the reverence with which I recall the memory of Massignon. Certainly, he held surprises in store for the philosopher, for his original training was by no means philosophical, hence at times some hesitations in his vocabulary, if not in the adoption of certain positions. On some occasions I came to know an ultra-Shi'ite Massignon, and I owe him much in this regard; his studies on Salman Pâk, on the *Mobâhala*, on Fatima, still hold a wealth of

intuition to be explored, combining them with the results of research carried out since then.

But on other days I would find him denouncing Shi'ism and the Shi'ites, whose major texts were, moreover, then unfamiliar to him. I would take up the defence of Shi'ism, countering that its conception of the Imamate was by no means 'carnal', for the earthly family bond between the Imams was but the image of their eternal pleromatic bond. Massignon was then surprised by "my" ultra-Shiism. Had I not undertaken a vast study of the texts of Ismaili gnosis? Yet he courageously asserted that Iranian Islam had freed Islam from all racial, ethnic or national attachments, though he confessed to me that he had never felt completely "at home" there. On the other hand, when I simply followed the line set out in the established project and in the works of Sohravardî, "the reviver of the theosophy of the Light of the sages of ancient Persia", Massignon became alarmed. "Don't be too 'Mazdean'," he advised me. What was to be done, then? First of all, one must not get the day wrong regarding the subject being discussed with him. Secondly, one must not forget why one had gone to see him, and must keep a firm grip on the thread of the conversation. Then there was every chance of leaving completely satisfied.

It was thus that one day – I believe it was during the academic year 1927–1928 – I was telling him about the reasons that had led me, as a philosopher, to study Arabic, about the questions I was asking myself regarding the relationship between philosophy and mysticism, and about what I knew – from a rather poor German summary – of a certain Sohravardî ... Then Massignon had a flash of inspiration. He had brought back from a trip to Iran a lithographed edition of Sohravardî's principal work, *Hikmat al-Ishrâq*, *The Eastern Theosophy*. Together with the commentaries, it formed a thick volume of over five hundred pages. "Here," he said to me, "I think there is something in this book for you." That something was the company of the young Shaykh al-Ishrâq, who has never left me throughout my life. I have always been a Platonist (in the broad sense of the word, of course); I believe one is born a Platonist, just as one can be born an atheist, a materialist, and so on. An unfathomable mystery of pre-existential choices. The young Platonist that I was then could not help but be enthralled by contact with the man who was 'the Imam of the Platonists of Persia'. I have spoken so much of him in my books, or by publishing and translating his works, that I shall add nothing here, save to point out the decisive feature.

Through my encounter with Sohravardî, my spiritual destiny for the journey through this world was sealed. That Platonism was expressed in the terms of the Zoroastrian angelology of ancient Persia, illuminating the path I sought. There was no longer any need to be cruelly torn between Sanskrit and Arabic. Persia lay there, at the centre, a middle and mediating world, for Persia, ancient Iran, is not merely a nation or an empire; it is a whole spiritual universe, a focal point in the history of religions. That world was ready to welcome me, and it did. From then on, the philosopher joined the ranks of the Orientalists. He would later explain, drawing on a wealth of experience, why he felt that from then on it was philosophers, not Orientalists, who were the only ones capable of taking charge of 'Eastern philosophy'.

The great adventure was beginning. Normally, after my bachelor's degree and my postgraduate diploma in philosophy, I would have had to take further courses to become a lecturer. It was the path to wisdom, without any surprises, so routine that a venerable professor from the Sorbonne, whom I occasionally saw at the homes of friends and to whom I reported

of the course of my decisions, asked me paternally: “But do you have personal wealth or time to spare?”

I had, thank God, neither one nor the other. But how could I endure the courses and the prospects of the agrégation when I had this great purpose in mind: to do for Iranian philosophy—whose great names appeared through the commentators on Sohravardî—what Étienne Gilson had done to 'resurrect' the medieval philosophy of the West? A gamble, perhaps, against the vicissitudes of Fate. But I believe that heaven granted me the favour of standing by that gamble and winning it.

Here, in a nutshell, is the decisive encounter in the 'career' of the Orientalist philosopher with the 'sky-coloured' land of Iran, 'the homeland of philosophers and poets'. The conversation with Philippe Némo focused above all on the convergence, in the same person, of the philosopher-Iranist and the translator of Heidegger. This *postscript* must therefore evoke another encounter: the encounter with the old Germany that was, in its time, also a "land of philosophers and poets". Two encounters, essentially complementary to one another. How did the latter come about?

Perhaps there are now only a few of us left among the friends of that fraternal, astonishing, inimitable pair, the Baruzi brothers: Joseph, the elder, author of **La Volonté de métamorphose** and **Le Rêve d'un siècle**, the musicologist who regularly contributes articles of profound musical insight to the journal **Le Ménestrel**. Jean, the younger brother, who spent twenty years writing his voluminous thesis on St John of the Cross, a work that had its admirers and its critics. Jean Baruzi, who stood in for Alfred Loisy at the Collège de France before becoming holder of the Chair of History of Religions. His lectures were followed with passionate devotion by a host of students, including a good number of students from the Faculty of Protestant Theology of the time. It was he who revealed to us the theology of the young Luther, of which so much was spoken at the time in the context of theological research in Germany: later, following him, the great spiritual figures of Protestantism: Sebastian Franck, Caspar Schwenkfel, Valentin Weigel, Johann Arndt, etc. The master made no secret of any of the difficulties encountered in reading them directly, but a surge of spiritual life swept them all away. It was completely new, captivating. I began to perceive certain resonances, like the call of a distant carillon inviting me to explore the realms encompassing what I would later call 'the phenomenon of the Holy Book'. It was the path of *hermeneutics* already opening up in the morning mists. If I had decided, upon hearing Avicenna interpreted by Étienne Gilson, to go there and see for myself by taking up the study of Arabic, it was impossible to hear of the path of the spiritual masters interpreted by Jean Baruzi without resolving to go to their place of origin. It was Jean Baruzi who showed me the way to the Germany of the philosophers and the 'great individuals' of mystical spirituality. My first stop was Marburg[3].

Thus, Iran and Germany became the geographical reference points for a quest that would in reality continue through spiritual regions not found on our maps. The

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[3] Regarding Corbin's thinking and activities in the 1930s, to which the author refers extensively in the following pages, the work by María Soster, "Le développement de la pensée d'Henry Corbin pendant les années trente", D.E.A. thesis in the History of Philosophy, University of Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2002, is of particular interest. *(Translator's note)*

I recall this here, in support of what I said at the beginning of my conversation with Philippe Némo. The philosopher continues his quest, responding with complete freedom to the inspiration of the Spirit.

My Iranian friends know full well that I cannot separate my friendship for Sohravardî and his circle from my friendship for Jacob Boehme and his school. I believe it is the union of what they symbolise that has made me what I am today.

The circle of friends gathered around the inseparable Baruzi brothers was an invitation to embark on the adventures of the Spirit. Through their immense culture, their sense of the most delicate, most subtle values of art and life, the two brothers were witnesses to another century, eminently representative of a Europe and a European society that vanished with the two world wars and which we have failed to rebuild, not even remotely: so stubborn and profound is the influence of the demons and the possessed that Dostoyevsky prophesied. There were frequent gatherings at his home on Place Victor Hugo, in addition to the 'seminar' sessions that Jean Baruzi held at his house, which would go on until very late at night. One could find among the participants all manner of unexpected European personalities. The presence of our German comrades was always significant. Jean Baruzi gave the gatherings the character they would have had had they been held in Goethe's Weimar. He was, par excellence, the professor who abolished all official distance between teacher and student. Only that of deferential friendship remained, a friendship that grew from year to year. Those who, like myself, had the privilege of experiencing that kind of relationship in which the teacher imparts his knowledge infinitely better than in any lecture, are now astounded when they hear students complaining about the inaccessible aloofness of their teachers. They sense the sad change of the times.

Marburg an der Lahn! Jean Baruzi knew how to guide me to that lofty place, where he had gone before me and where he had struck up friendships with Rudolf Otto and Friedrich Heiler. How can one express the wonder of a young philosopher arriving in Marburg in early July 1930? The spell of the place, of that 'inspired hill' that lives solely for and through the University, the magnificent forests that surrounded it... I stayed there for over a month. My first visit was to Rudolf Otto, who was already *emeritus* but whose presence was no less active for that, as he remained a leading figure in liberal Protestant Germany. His books on 'the sacred', on 'the mysticism of East and West', his profound knowledge of the philosophical and religious schools of India were impressive, and even more impressive was the simplicity with which this eminent scholar conversed, in admirably classical French, with a beginner as if he were a young colleague, simply because the latter was an Arabist.

Two coincidences I wish to point out. The first was that, during my stay in Marburg, Rabindranath Tagore arrived. I shall never forget the radiant beauty of the venerable faces of the two elderly men, Rabindranath Tagore and Rudolf Otto, seated side by side on the podium of the *Aula Magna* at the University of Marburg. Second coincidence: it was precisely at that time that Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn came to Marburg to discuss at length with Rudolf Otto a project to which he gave form and meaning. The project took shape and became the *Eranos* Circle in Ascona, whose importance in my

I shall recall my life as a seeker later on. Olga and I have often spoken of the emotions we each felt when we rang the doorbell at Rudolf Otto’s residence.

In Marburg, amongst the students I met at the time, there was an intense philosophical and theological life. I shall not dwell too much on certain aspects; I would have to mention the stirrings that Rudolf Bultmann's theology was beginning to cause. But there was Friedrich Heiler, mentioned earlier, a professor at the Faculty of Theology. A pained figure, author of a great book on prayer that aspired to the formation of a Christianity without denominational ties. There was my late friend Albert-Marie Schmidt, who was then a lecturer in French. Strangely enough, it was he who gave me the French translation of Swedenborg's first book (*Du ciel et de l'Enfer [Of Heaven and Hell])* that fell into my hands. Deep down, Swedenborg inspired a certain fear in the pious Calvinist, and he no doubt thought, in passing this book on to me, that it would be in better hands than his own. It was, therefore, in Marburg that I immersed myself for the first time, with admiration, in the reading of Swedenborg, whose immense body of work was thus to accompany me throughout my life. Moreover, it marked the beginning of my friendship with Ernst Benz, who later became a professor at the Faculty of Theology in Marburg. He himself was an eminent specialist in Swedenborgian studies, and it was at *Eranos* that we met, twenty-eight years ago now, as if there were a permanent link between Marburg and *Eranos*.

Another paradox. It was through Professor Theodor Siegfried, who had been appointed by Otto, that I first heard of Karl Barth. He even sent me a copy of the concise commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Although Siegfried had warned me against the pure formalism to which 'dialectical theology' was condemned, I threw myself eagerly into reading that book, in which I sensed a host of ideas being formulated for the first time. Its consequences were to last for several years. Heidegger had already left the University of Marburg for that of Freiburg, but there were two eminent *Privatdozenten* in philosophy*:* Karl Löwith, with whom I had long conversations about Hamann and the currents linked to his work, and Gerhard Krüger, an expert in phenomenology, in whose seminar I sensed all the issues that were the order of the day in Germany. When I left Marburg to set off on a pilgrimage to Weimar, then to Eisenach and the Wartburg, I had the impression that I had to start my entire philosophical education all over again. It was both exhilarating and overwhelming.

This first encounter with German philosophy led me to make repeated visits to Germany between 1931 and 1936. It is with some emotion that I recall, thinking of all those who are no longer with us (among them Landsbert and so many others), a stay in Bonn in the spring of 1932. There, of course, was Karl Barth and the formidable cohort of his disciples and followers. The theological discussions were in full swing, all the more so as a catastrophe was felt to be imminent. It was at that time that I translated a short work by Karl Barth: *Die Not der evangelischen Kirche (The Sorrow of the Protestant Church),* though it was ultimately titled, at the suggestion of Pierre Maury: *Misére et Grandeur de l'Église évangélique [Misery and Grandeur of the Evangelical Church].* Among Karl Barth's colleagues was Fritz Lieb, a striking figure in his mystical love for Orthodox Russia, a love so boundless that it seemed he had not realised that, for the time being, Holy Orthodox Russia had… ascended to heaven. Our bond was our shared friendship with Nikolai Berdyaev, to whom I have had occasion to express my spiritual debt elsewhere.

Fritz Lieb and I were together at Nikolai Berdyaev’s house, the three of us engaged in an eschatological conversation on a certain dramatic night in the spring of 1939.

I have cited Fritz Lieb here as a representative case: he was both a follower of Karl Barth and enamoured of Weigel, of Paracelsus, of Father Sergei Bulgakov's sophiology. More than once I asked him: 'How do you reconcile all this, dear Lieb?' 'Oh! It is difficult, it is difficult!', he would reply. And he had tears in his eyes.

I ought to mention here two stays in Hamburg, where Ernst Cassirer, the philosopher of symbolic forms, was teaching; he broadened my path towards what I was seeking and still dimly sensed, and which was later to become my entire philosophy of *the mundus imaginalis*, a term I owe to our Platonists of Persia. Cassirer knew the Cambridge Platonists very well and thus introduced me to other members of my spiritual family. There was also the Warburg Institute, with all the holdings of its library. It was in the spring of 1934 that I paid my first visit to Heidegger in Freiburg. We then sketched out a plan to collect pamphlets and extracts that I would translate, bringing them together under the title: *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?* We had to start with a limited project. Later, the generosity of Julien Cain, administrator of the National Library, granted me a research fellowship that enabled me to spend the 1935–1936 academic year in Berlin, at our *Französisches Akademikerhaus*, whose director was my friend Henri Jourdan, whom I had met as a lecturer at the University of Bonn. In July 1936, my wife and I spent some time in Freiburg, where I was able to put certain translation difficulties to Heidegger for his consideration. But he had complete confidence in me, approved all my French neologisms and left me with a somewhat heavy responsibility. I recalled that period in the previous conversation.

My Germanic experiences had broadened my circle of friends in Paris. I would like to express just how much Alexandre Koyré's friendship meant to me; he was one of the most brilliant minds I have ever had the privilege of knowing. He was initially known for his monumental work on Jacob Boehme, and later for a whole body of publications on the history of science and the astronomical revolution. Because of his work on Boehme and other publications on the spiritualists—which, incidentally, Jean Baruzi was also studying—many thought that Alexandre Koyré was a great mystical theosophist. But he was a man of utter modesty and discretion regarding his innermost convictions. Often, a *witticism* might suggest agnosticism, or even a desperate nihilism. In truth, our friend Koyré took his secret with him. I say this not without emotion, for I was the last of his colleagues at the École des Hautes-Études to shake his hand, in the clinic, on the eve of his death.

What I wish to say in tribute to his memory is that he was, in a way that was undoubtedly different from Jean Baruzi, the friend and companion of his students and listeners at the École des Hautes-Études. Most of the lectures ended at d'Harcourt, the historic and cosy café on the corner of the Place de la Sorbonne and the Boulevard Saint-Michel. Who will give us back the d'Harcourt that I found, after the war, transformed into an uplifting bookshop and which is now a clothes and shoe shop! It was at d'Harcourt that a part of the French philosophy of the time was forged. Hegel and the renewal of Hegelian studies occupied an important place there. Gathered around Koyré were Alexandre Kojève (Kojevnickov), Raymond Queneau, myself, philosophers such as Fritz Heinemann, and many of

our Israeli colleagues who had chosen exile and whose harrowing accounts informed us of the course of events in Germany.

The tone would often become very heated. Kojève and Heinemann were in complete and utter disagreement over the interpretation of the Phenomenology of Spirit. Debates between Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's were a frequent occurrence. Later, we would tease Queneau: how did he manage to write a novel? Did he draw up a plan? Did he just let things take their course? I cannot mention here all the names that come to mind, but I cannot fail to recall in particular the figure of my old friend Bernard Groethuysen, our incomparable Socrates, the central figure of the unforgettable evenings that Alexandre Koyré and his wife hosted in their small flat on Rue Navarre. Groethuysen's humour seemed to master the vicissitudes of the times and our concerns. It was he who inaugurated 'philosophical anthropology' (his great work, bearing that title, remained unfinished), and it was thanks to his tenacity that my translation of Heidegger could see the light of day, for this 'unknown' philosopher held little interest for publishers.

During the evenings on Rue Navarre, the outline of the next volume of *Recherches philosophiques* always took centre stage. We have nothing comparable today. The spirited publisher Boivin bore the full weight of the six thick annual volumes, each of some five hundred pages, which served as a precious laboratory for most of us. If a researcher of our day were to consult them, they would find that rarely has such a constellation of philosophers been assembled, nor have so many new topics been addressed, amongst which phenomenology naturally occupied a prominent place.

Phenomenology was also very often at the centre of the conversations that filled the long evenings at Gabriel Marcel's home. There were the philosophers Le Senne and Louis Lavelle—as pleasant to listen to as he is painful to read—and, as was the case around Koyré, many Israeli colleagues who had fled Germany. "Jaspers and Heidegger": another topic of debate whose unexpected twists and turns elicited the same frequent exclamation: "This strikes me as very serious… very serious," we would hear our dear Gabriel Marcel repeat in the high, shrill notes of the scale. And these accumulated gravities weighed ever more heavily on our reflections.

There was also the group of new Protestant theologians, who had set up their headquarters in the offices of *Éditions "Je sers"*, then located on Rue du Four. Of course, in a country like ours, the audience was inevitably limited, but we tried to respond to the call of our deepest convictions. We placed all our hope in Karl Barth for a renewal of Protestant theology. In 1931–1932 we (Denis de Rugemont, Roland de Pury, Albert-Marie Schmidt, Roger Jezequel and myself) had founded a small journal entitled *Hic et Nunc*, and we went about it with that youthful recklessness which dismays the older generation no less than the young when the latter in turn become the elders to whom life has taught a few things. We shared Keyserling's conviction when he stated: "Karl Barth and his friends hold the future of Protestantism in their hands." Alas! Our hopes fell from a great height, and if dear Rudolf Otto had been there, he might have said to me, taking me by the hand to lead me back to Schleiermacher: "Did I not already foretell this to you?"

Very soon, moreover, I ceased to feel at ease with ‘Barthism’ and dialectical theology. We claimed Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky as our spiritual forebears. That was all well and good, but it was not enough to revolutionise philosophy as my friends intended to do.

Sohravardî had already warned me, pointing out that, since this 'revolution' was being carried out at the expense of a philosophy that no longer deserved the name, there were grounds for attempting to regain access to the *Sophia* of another philosophy. It is very difficult to gauge the responsibility of a man and a work in relation to what has befallen them. But it is ultimately impossible not to note the gulf between the commentary on *the Epistle to the Romans*, with its flashes of prophecy, and the ponderous and colossal *Dogmatics* produced by the mature Karl Barth. A new 'dogmatics'? No, that was not really what we had desired and hoped for; we then seemed to be trailing behind the last-minute 'Barthians'. I had given Karl Barth my first publication as an Orientalist: the edition and translation of Sohravardî's *The Murmur of Gabriel's Wings*. He read it and spoke to me about it later with a benevolent smile, uttering the words "natural theology". He went no further. I was dismayed. I wrote to him about it (perhaps that is my letter of 1936 preserved in the Barth-Archiv in Basel). Meanwhile, there was Karl Barth's memorable visit to Paris (1934). I had the opportunity to speak to him of my interest in the 'speculative theologians' of the early nineteenth century, those who have been called the right-wing Hegelians and who read Hegel in the same way as they read Meister Eckhart. I mentioned, among others, Philipp Marheineke, in whom I was particularly interested. I can still see Karl Barth's astonished wonder and still hear his voice: "Have you read Marheineke, Monsieur Corbin?". I detected in him a discreet sympathy, which I found difficult to explain, for that "speculative" theologian—unfairly but completely forgotten, though he might well become highly topical any day now. This sympathy remained Karl Barth's secret, ultimately leaving us facing a "profound gulf" between his "dialectical theology" and this right-wing Hegelian theology, so vigorously directed against rationalism, whilst the routine of our translations has made "reason" the equivalent of *Vernunft*, even though the word refers us to the Greek *Noûs*. The whole Hegelian and post-Hegelian milieu would change if we were to take this into account.

At that moment, I was faced with a first, disheartening realisation. The 'science of religions' had largely been the work of Protestant theologians, but Karl Barth's theology held the deepest contempt for any science or history of religions. He naively contrasted religions, as a human endeavour, with Christianity, which was God's descent and initiative towards humanity, which is why Christianity should not even be considered a 'religion'. Nothing particularly original, since something similar had already been said in Islam long before Karl Barth. To this, as to the legalist theologians of Islam, there is one and the same response: that of Ibn 'Arabî and his school. Barthian dialectical theology, deliberately opting for a complete ignorance of the *religious matter*, proved incapable of glimpsing the task of this 'general theology of religions', the urgency of which is increasingly felt. It remained in the rear of the immense horizon of the cycle of prophetic religion, as conceived by Shi'ite gnosis, particularly Haydar Âmolî (14th century). Where we had glimpsed with Keyserling the promise of a new future, we have in fact seen the emergence of a 'theology of the death of God', then a 'theology of revolution', followed by a 'theology of

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[4] "The Rustling of Gabriel's Wings", in S.Y. Sohravardî, *The Encounter with the Angel,* op. cit., pp. 67–112. *(Translator's note)*

“the class struggle”, identifying the Gospel message with this. Not even in the darkest hours preceding the Second World War would anyone have dared to imagine such a collapse.

Perhaps I myself would have been swept up in that debacle had I not, in the meantime, by one of those decrees passed in the Unseen by the Unseen, been set apart in complete philosophical and theological solitude, which allowed a completely different philosophy and theology to take shape within me. There is something that has remained overlooked over the centuries by all our dogmas and confessions of faith. It is the intimate, secret solidarity between the ‘esoteric’ aspects of the ‘religions of the Book’, such that, whilst devastated Christianity has succumbed to the perils of History, a long pilgrimage through one of these ‘religions of the Book’, particularly Shi’ite gnosis in its two forms (Duodeciman Imamite and Ismaili), leads once again to the rediscovery of a Christianity whose place is permanent within the cycle of prophetic religion, but which differs so greatly from the official forms of Christianity in history that it is difficult for the layman to comprehend. I shall now, therefore, turn to the long years of pilgrimage that kept me away from Europe whilst the tragic course of its history was unfolding.

Of course, it is not the external unfolding of that story—as it might have been experienced on the turning wheel that was Istanbul during those dark years—that I shall be referring to here. It is the story of the *Malakût* alone that I wish to evoke. In the spring of 1939, I had been entrusted with the task of collecting photocopies of all Sohravardî’s manuscripts scattered throughout the libraries of Istanbul, with a view to producing a critical edition of his works in Arabic and Persian. The deadline for completing this task was set for 1 September 1939. At that time, the objective seemed very fragile amidst the unfolding events. However, after much discussion, my wife and I set off for Istanbul on 30 October 1939, accompanied by Julien Cain’s paternal concerns. The mission was initially intended to last three months. It lasted six years, until September 1945. Over the years, during which I acted as custodian of the small French Institute of Archaeology, which lay as if in a state of dormancy, I learnt the inestimable virtues of Silence, of that which the initiated call the ‘discipline of the arcane’ (in Persian, *ketmân)*. One of the virtues of that silence was to leave me alone in the company of my invisible shaykh, Shihâboddîn Yahyâ Sohravardî, who died a martyr in 1191 at the age of thirty-six, the same age I was then. Throughout the day and night I translated from Arabic, taking as my guide only the commentators and followers of Sohravardî, and thus escaping the external influence of any current philosophical or theological school or movement. By the end of those years of retreat I had become an *Ishrâqî*, and the typesetting of the first volume of Sohravardî’s works was almost complete. Admittedly, I had little opportunity to speak of it to those around me, except, for example, with Turkish friends of Bektashi origin. The memory of Yahya Kemal remains unforgettable.

But Istanbul was Byzantium, Constantinople. Just as Solomon’s Temple was the centre of Jerusalem, the Temple of Hagia Sophia was the centre of the Second Rome. In the years

, the American scholar Whitemore had devoted all his efforts to the restoration of the mosaics. Visiting Hagia Sophia in Whitemore's company was at once a privilege, an adventure and a pilgrimage. There, Whitemore was in his element; he was the temple's guardian, and he showed the visitor the honours of the house, lingering at length with him before the radiance of the mosaics' interior light, wonderfully set free.

One had to be in his company for him to draw attention to a later drawing, high up on the inner west wall, which 'encodes' the secret of the Temple of Sophia. The drawing depicts a small dome accessed by seven steps. An evocation of the Temple of Wisdom with seven pillars (Prov 9:1). "I said to Wisdom: 'You are my sister! And call Intelligence my friend'" (*Prov* 7:4*)*. An *Ishrâqî* is, by nature, a Sophianist. The Temple of Hagia Sophia was for me the Temple of the Grail, or at least an embodiment of its archetype sensed by many seekers in gnosis. In a vast hall that might once have been the sacristy, there was a valuable collection of Arabic and Persian manuscripts. I often went there to work, and as I crossed the Temple I would hum softly the themes of the Grail and the mystical supper from Wagner's *Parsifal*. This presence of an invisible Sophianic chivalry, known equally to the Platonists of Persia, never left me again. Traces of what it inspired in me can be found in my most [recent] research and projects5.

However, I could not return to France without visiting my country of choice, my home of choice, since it was the homeland of Sohravardî, my invisible shaykh. In August 1944, I was entrusted with a mission to Persia by what was still the 'Government of Algiers'. As I had to wait for someone to relieve me at our Institute of Archaeology in Istanbul, I had to wait until 1945 to carry it out. That too was intended to last three months, but it has now stretched on for more than thirty years. At that time, the journey from Istanbul to Tehran was also an adventure. There was the 'strategic' railway line to Baghdad, where one had to disembark onto the ballast. Then, by car from Baghdad to Tehran, across the Zagros mountain range. An exhausting but exhilarating journey. The Tehran that welcomed us on 14 September 1945 bore little resemblance to today's Tehran. The city was about the size of one of our prefectures and had a population of some 800,000. Today, the city's area has increased tenfold. What was once the north has become the south. What was still desert is now a vast city criss-crossed by magnificent tree-lined boulevards, and there are over three million inhabitants. The little *doroshki* (horse-drawn carriages) were sufficient for the traffic. Today, with over a million cars, the traffic has become a nightmare and defies any attempt at timekeeping. All this, coupled with the emergence of a middle class that was then non-existent, is nothing but a symptom of the prodigious transformation Iran has undergone in the space of a single generation. It was fascinating to witness this, but here too it is not the external events that I wish to recount.

In the short text entitled "From the Bibliothèque Nationale to the Iranian Library", which is reproduced in this very [volume,][6] I had the opportunity to explain the objective of my mission and how I set about putting "the grand projects and vast ideas" into practice. I shall not, therefore, repeat myself here.

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[5] See, for example, H. Corbin, *"La Imago Templi* frente a las normas profanas", in *Templo y contemplación,* Trotta, Madrid, 2003, pp. 259–378. *(Translator's note)*

[6] This text was not ultimately included in the *Cahier de l'Herne* from which the texts comprising this book were drawn. The article in question appears in **Humanisme actif. Mélanges d'art et de littérature offerts à Julien Cain*,* Hartmann, Paris, 1968, pp. 309–320. *(Translator's note)*

I shall merely mention the warm reception given to my projects by my Iranian friends, a reception which carried great weight with the French authorities in favour of the creation of a 'Department of Iranology', attached to the new French Institute, established by the French Directorate of Cultural Relations and inaugurated in Tehran after the summer of 1947.

The time had come to put into practice the project that had taken root in my mind following Étienne Gilson's lectures. The immediate task: to gather the material, set up a study, and begin publishing. Working conditions in Tehran were not what they are today, when we can find large collections of manuscripts accompanied by catalogues. There were libraries then, but few or no catalogues. One could only rely on luck; but it is true that luck usually favours the persistent seeker. I began the publication of the *Bibliothèque Iranienne*, and was able to continue it, for twenty-five years, with the help of a few collaborators, up to volume twenty-two. Each volume, produced entirely on site, demanded a great deal of effort. The collection was essentially a compilation of previously unpublished texts, in Persian or Arabic, with each volume including a full translation or at least a comprehensive introduction to enable the non-Orientalist philosopher to make the best possible use of the book. I believe that this collection, whose volumes are now almost all [7] out of print, managed to make a name for itself. At that time, I could only speak of Sohravardî, Mollâ Sadrâ and so many others with venerable shaykhs. Today, it is a whole host of young researchers who take the cause of traditional philosophy very seriously. Let us not hide the difficulties. To create or recreate a philosophical tradition, to provide it with all the necessary conceptual and lexicographical tools, takes several generations. Another sign, of a completely different nature, is true: major avenues in modern Tehran now bear the names of our philosophers. One of the most beautiful is Sohravardî Avenue. No one could have imagined this thirty years ago. And in the West, we have had to concede to the evidence that Islamic philosophy did not come to a halt in the 12th century with Averroes, and that Iranian Islamic philosophy formed a veritable continent whose exploration had been completely overlooked. Today, I know young philosophers who are beginning to take it on board, to the extent that the names of Sohravardî and others appear in their students' dissertations. This is truly something new.

It was in Tehran, in the spring of 1954, that I received the news that the Section of Religious Sciences was calling on me to succeed Louis Massignon as head of Islamic studies. Dear Massignon was no stranger to this choice. I was aware of his interests and, whatever our differences of opinion, he considered me the closest to him to continue the direction he had given to the research, if not in terms of its content, at least in terms of its meaning and spirit. But in the meantime, in the spring of 1949 to be precise, I had received another call, the consequences of which have been felt ever since in the programme and pace of my research.

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[7] At present, all volumes of the *Bibliothèque iranienne* are out of print, although several have been reprinted by various French publishers, almost always omitting the Arabic or Persian texts. *(Translator's note)*

I am referring to the invitation sent to me by Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn to participate in the *Eranos* circle which she had founded in 1932, in Ascona (in Ticino, on the shores of Lake Maggiore); I had previously recalled the role played in that initiative by the inspiration of Rudolf Otto. This participation was to take the form of two lectures, each lasting one hour, in August 1949. I had no idea that this involvement would continue for more than a quarter of a century. I have testified in a short text reproduced in this volume to what constitutes the spirit and unique reality of *Eranos.* Undoubtedly, what the *Eranos* Circle has been able to offer each of the approximately 150 speakers who have taken part there over the past half-century varies, necessarily, considerably from case to case. There are those who merely passed through, for a year or two, no more, because an indefinable, mysterious sign warned that neither their nature nor their behaviour would be able to harmonise with an end in itself that is difficult to define. On the other hand, there was the small group of those who, year after year, became, without having planned it in the slightest, the mainstay of the *Eranos* concept. As for the decisive role that *Eranos* played for the latter, it was, above all, in addition to training them in the mastery of their specialism, to lead them to a comprehensive spiritual freedom. Each one gradually discovered and allowed the innermost part of themselves to speak. All ecclesiastical, academic or university orthodoxy, of whatever kind, is completely at odds with this. This learning to be open and wholly oneself becomes a habit that is no longer lost, however dangerous it might sometimes be in its strangeness. The lectures from each session are published in a substantial volume in three languages. By 1978, the collection had reached its 45th volume, constituting a veritable encyclopaedia for researchers in the sciences of symbols. For the participants, each of these volumes represented something of a laboratory, where the first tentative steps of a new line of research were taken. For almost all of them, these essays have been transformed into books.

That spirit of *Eranos* was nourished and strengthened by the exchange of ideas amongst the members of the circle—symbolised by our Round Table beneath the cedar tree—and by the friendships forged there over the years. Rudolf Otto, who had helped Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn to define her vision, never attended. Instead, Carl Gustav Jung was for years something of a guiding genius, sketching out his books in lectures that drew a large audience in Zurich. The meetings with C.G. Jung were unforgettable. We had long conversations in Ascona, in Küssnacht, in Bollingen, at his castle, to which my friend Carl-Alfred Meier would take me. What can I say about those conversations regarding which I would not wish to leave any ambiguity hanging? I was a metaphysician, not a psychologist. Jung was a psychologist, not a metaphysician, although he frequently dabbled in metaphysics. Our backgrounds and respective aims were very different, and yet we understood one another in dialogue, to the extent that when his **Answer to Job** appeared—a work that was savagely attacked from all confessional quarters—I wished to offer a fair interpretation of his work in a long article that earned me his friendship. This article made him, in a way, an interpreter of *Sophia* and of sophrology. Dare I say that Jung's teaching and conversation could offer every metaphysician, every theologian, an invaluable gift, provided that

they were able to distance themselves from them at the right moment? I am reminded of André Gide's precept: 'Now, Nathanaël, throw my book away…'.

Jung defended himself vigorously and with humour against being labelled a ‘Jungian’. I myself was a friend of Jung’s, but I was never a ‘Jungian’. I mention this because, for many superficial or naive readers, it is enough for one to refer to an author several times for them to count him among his followers.

What struck a philosopher immediately about the psychologist Jung was the rigour with which he spoke of the soul and the reality of the soul, his rebellion against the dissolution of the soul towards which Freud’s psychoanalysis, the laboratories of psychology and so many other inventions—in which our agnostic world is so prolific—blithely led. Is it not symptomatic that, of Jung’s technical terms such as ‘collective unconscious’ or ‘process of individuation’, in France it often seems that only the former is retained, and that merely to emphasise the word ‘collective’? It is to be feared that this misunderstanding, whether complete or incomplete, will persist. This explicit reservation enables us to appreciate what Jung was the first to discern and express through the concepts *of Animus* and *Anima*, although, unfortunately, the use made of them afterwards came to resemble too closely that of a small automatic device applied, whether appropriate or not, to every case. But the path Jung set us on was that of the discovery of *the* inner *Imago*. To recognise in a face the features and radiance of this *Imago* is, then, to cease agitating oneself in a vain external search for the inaccessible, but rather to understand that this *Imago* is first and foremost present within oneself, and that it is this inner presence that enables me to recognise it externally. Later, I was to be absorbed—and still am—by the metaphysics of active imagination (the ‘agent imagination’) and what my Iranian philosophers led me to call, to distinguish it from the purely imaginary, the *imaginal* world, the world of imaginal forms (*mundus imaginalis*, the literal equivalent of the Arabic *‘âlam al-mithâl).* But I had to ascertain this. Everything the psychologist says about the *Imago* takes on, for the metaphysician, a metaphysical meaning. Everything the metaphysician says is interpreted by the psychologist in terms of psychology. Hence all the possible misunderstandings. That is why I said earlier that after we had informed one another, we had to accept the inevitable separation when the time came.

And this applies to all the remarkable research undertaken by C.G. Jung. His works on alchemy are based on a vast body of documentation, and every researcher in alchemy ought to read them and draw inspiration from them. From this research, Jung derived the idea of a ‘world of subtle bodies’. This intuition was profoundly accurate. That world of subtle bodies has been rigorously defined and situated by the traditional theosophers of Islam: the intermediate world where spirits become embodied and bodies become spiritualised. It is, precisely, the *mundus imaginalis*, the world of the Soul, the *Malakût*, the first world of the Angel. Unfortunately, whatever his desire to restore the Soul and the world of the Soul, the Western psychologist still lacks those foundations or that metaphysical framework which ontologically ensures the function of that mediating world, which preserves the *imaginal* from the disorders and ramblings of the *imaginary*, from hallucination and madness. This is why I have had to make a radical distinction between the *imaginal* and the *imaginary*. But since this radical and decisive distinction has scarcely been accepted as yet, I avoid speaking, in the presence of a psychologist, of the Angel and of angelology, which have occupied such a prominent place in my research.

Compare the interpretation of the prophets' visions by a Kabbalist or through the *ta'wîl* of Shi'ite gnosis with the analysis offered of them by a psychologist. There remains a 'profound gulf' between the two. The loss of the *imaginal* in the West takes us back to the entire current that emerged from Descartes and Mersenne, in opposition to the Cambridge Platonists and everything represented by J. Boehme, Swedenborg and Oetinger. It is a veritable 'battle for the Soul of the World' that we must wage. Jungian psychology can suitably prepare the ground for the battle, but the victorious conclusion of the battle depends on weapons other than those of psychology.

I have just emphasised the case and the considerable work of C.G. Jung because the affinity between us is no mystery, but I also wish to dispel any ambiguity that might cast me as the psychologist I am not, or make me suspect of a 'psychologism' that I have always fought against. That said, the *Eranos* sessions provided the occasion for many memorable and lasting encounters: Adolf Portmann, the master of the natural sciences in the spirit of Goethe; Gerhard van der Leeuw, the great Dutch phenomenologist of the *religious phenomenon;*
D.T. Suzuki, the master of Zen Buddhism; Victor Zuckerkandl, the incomparable phenomenologist of musical discourse; Ernst Benz, to whom no religious movement of yesterday or today is alien; my friends Mircea Eliade, Gilbert Durand, James Hillman—how can I name them all? In any case, let my friend Gershom Scholem occupy a special place, to whom Kabbalah studies owe a complete renewal. His monumental work is an inexhaustible source for us. Or rather, it makes us heed an imperative from which we can no longer escape, namely that from now on, we can no longer separate the forms of esotericism in the three great 'religions of the Book' from one another.

So, when I received the news in Tehran in the spring of 1954 that a vote by the Council of the Section of Religious Sciences at the École des Hautes-Études had appointed me to succeed Louis Massignon, I found myself torn at that moment between immense joy—needless to say—and a painful sense of unease. My research and publications in Tehran were just taking off. Our small Department of Iranian Studies was beginning to assert its vitality. There was no one ready to take over. What would become of all that if my return to Paris meant I had to abandon it? It was then that a fortunate administrative solution was found. By combining holiday leave with a regular authorisation for absence, I was able to have practically the whole autumn term at my disposal to continue my work in Tehran. And so, every year in September, I would board the plane to Tehran once more, where I would stay until December. The continuation of my life in Iran was decisive for the direction and content of my teaching at the Hautes-Études, which would not have been what it was had I not been able to maintain contact with my Iranian colleagues and friends in this way, keep abreast of their publications, continue with the *Bibliothèque Iranienne* and keep adding to my collection of photocopied manuscripts. Most of my courses at the Hautes-Études were based on manuscripts

that were as yet unpublished. Each year I provided a detailed summary of them in the *Annuaire* of our Section.[8] The sequence of my research is thus easy to follow.

[8] All these summaries are collected in H. Corbin, *Itinéraire d'un enseignement,* Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, Tehran, 1993. *(Translator's note)*

Admittedly, from time to time I heard vague rumours lamenting that I had turned this field of study into a department of Shi'ism. If such a criticism was ever actually voiced, it was based on a completely false premise. Our Department of Religious Studies is not a Faculty of Theology, with a curriculum designed to teach dogma. It is a centre of research unique in the world, I believe, as far as the 'religious sciences' are concerned. Each of us freely directs our research and teaching in the direction we deem most urgent, whether because that direction had hitherto been particularly neglected, or because new documentary evidence has completely altered accepted viewpoints. I believe that studies of Twelver and Ismaili Shiism, as well as the metaphysics of Sufism, presented such an urgency from this dual perspective.

Moreover, I was not surprised if my publications provoked some astonishment, if not sceptical resistance. It had never been heard said that there was a distinct and originally Shi'ite philosophy. The recently published Ismaili treatises, or the manuscripts that were providentially becoming accessible, were ignored. Ignoring its practical application, the Sohravardian project to 'resurrect the theosophy of the sages of ancient Persia' had never been taken seriously, even though that project had left its mark on a significant part of later Iranian thought, for it was this very thought that was systematically ignored. The pious ascetics of Mesopotamia from the early centuries of the Hegira were known, but scarcely any attention had been paid to the diversity of what must be called the 'metaphysics of Sufism': that of Ibn 'Arabî, Najmoddîn Kobrâ, Semnânî, Haydar Âmolî, etc. Islamic mysticism and Sufism were equated, and Shi'ism was made into an adversary of mysticism, because it had on occasion taken a harsh stance towards a certain form of Sufism. But it was overlooked that Islamic mysticism and *tasawwuf* do not exactly overlap, that there is a whole body of Shi'ite mysticism and theosophy (*'erfân-e shî'î)* outside of Sufism, and even outside the expressly Shi'ite Sufi *tarâ'iq* (congregations), for the simple reason that the position of the Shi'ite believer places him, from the outset, unlike the Sunni believer, on the mystical path (*tarîqa)*. Let us clarify the situation: the great Shi'ite *'orafâ* (mystical theosophers), including Molla Sadra Shirazi and many others, were subject to criticism from their colleagues, members of what must paradoxically be called a Shi'ite 'clergy'. But this only serves to link them more closely to the shared fate of their Gnostic brethren everywhere and throughout history.

These few lines merely touch upon some aspects of the immense task that lay before me if I were to bring to fruition the project that had first taken shape in the mind of a young student of É. Gilson. I did not draw up a five-year plan, but a twenty-year plan. It has almost been fulfilled, and, thank heaven, I am still carrying it out *in my retirement.* In a collective volume published by my colleagues in the Section of Religious Sciences, I had the opportunity to explain how I had conceived and planned my work. It was at once 'a programme and a testament'. The text is reproduced under that title in the present [volume9]. I need not therefore

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[9] Ultimately, that text was not included in the *Cahier de l'Herne* and, consequently, does not appear in *L'Imam caché* either. As a result, it does not appear in this volume either. *(Translator's note)*

repeat its points here, nor can I summarise the main theses put forward in my books in a biographical *postscript*.

But what I still have to say is this. One does not live for more than thirty years in contact with the finest products of a culture's philosophy and spirituality—especially those of a spiritual world such as Iran's—without being imbued by them. Certainly, I am and remain a Westerner (in the earthly sense of the word), for it is as a Westerner that I have achieved what I have been able to achieve. But there is something, on the other hand, that every philosopher knows very well: one cannot complete a book on Plato, for example, unless one is Platonic at least for the duration of writing it. This is what historians of religions as such find very difficult to understand. I recall that during an international conference some twenty years ago, a colleague from a distant country, upon hearing me speak of Shi'ism in the terms I usually use, whispered to his neighbour: 'How can he speak that way about a religion that is not his own?'. But what does it mean to 'make a religion or philosophy my own'? Unfortunately, there are those who can think only in terms of 'conversion', which allows them to attach a collective label to you. No. To speak of 'conversion' is to have understood nothing of what 'esotericism' is. A philosopher knows full well that being Platonic does not mean joining a Platonic church, and even less so being prevented from being anything other than Platonic. The *'orafâ*, whether from the East or the West, can think and weigh things only in terms of interiority and internalisation, which means making within oneself a permanent dwelling for the philosophies and religions to which one's quest leads. And one can only keep one's secret: *Secretum meum mihi*, the secret of the castle of the soul. It is not in an external choice of a sociological nature that this profound inner reality manifests itself outwardly; it is in the personal work he produces, and in the externalisation of which all modes of lived being converge. The community, the *omma*, of esotericists everywhere and of all times, is this 'Inner Church' which imposes no act of belonging in order to be part of it.

But this inner bond is the true bond, because it is indispensable and unbreakable, and because it is only in this case that it is true to say that 'out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks'. And that, I believe, is what enables my Iranian friends to bear witness to me, after long years of work devoted to what we loved together, a friendship free of any ulterior motive, a friendship that has been and continues to be, with the memory of so many who have passed away, the treasure of a long life. This friendship manifested itself in a moving way when, in 1973, I reached what has come to be known as the 'age limit'. I had to say goodbye to Iran then. But no. It was then, as if by providence, that an 'Iranian Academy of Philosophy' was founded, which welcomed me as a member. It is an institution which, by bringing together philosophers, set out both to train young Iranian researchers in philosophy and to help philosophers from all other countries to undertake research in Iran. A dual task, both urgent and far-reaching. There, then, books are published, and courses and lectures are given. This is how, having left my Department of Iranian Studies at the French Institute to its own devices, I am able to continue spending the autumn term in Tehran every year to teach at the Academy of

Philosophy. Furthermore, I alluded earlier to the privilege of being able to continue giving lectures at the École des Hautes-Études, even *in my emeritus years*, until my last breath, if I so wish. It is thus that I continue to divide my time between Paris and Tehran, an arrangement that will, I hope, enable me to bring to completion some of the major undertakings I have embarked upon.

At the forefront of these great, as yet unfinished tasks, I must place the project discussed in this very volume in an article by my eminent colleague and friend Sayyed Jalâdoddîn Ashtiyânî,[10] professor at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Mashhad. Professor Ashtiyânî is undoubtedly the most representative figure in Iran today of the philosophical lineage of Mollâ Sadrâ. The breadth of the material he has gathered is prodigious. Devoted day and night solely to his task, he is in a sense a Mollâ Sadrâ *reborn* and a prolific *'erfânî'* philosopher. Our project was conceived in 1964–1965. In response to those who, since Ernest Renan, have considered that the destiny of Islamic philosophy came to an end in the 12th century with the death of Averroes, as we recalled earlier, the project consisted of compiling a vast anthology of Iranian philosophers from the 17th century to the present day. Ashtiyânî would be responsible for collecting and presenting the texts; for my part, I would provide their essence in French, so that Western philosophers who are not Orientalists might at last become acquainted with them. Some of these texts had been published in old lithographs, but the majority were still in unpublished manuscripts.

We had originally planned five volumes in large octavo. We now believe there will be seven. The first two have already been published. The printing of the Arabic and Persian sections of Volume III is complete (some 800 pages), and that of Volume IV is in preparation. From now on, I shall be responsible for compiling the respective French sections into separate volumes, which will present the Islamic philosophy of Iran[11]. These are the works of some forty philosophers that we are thus bringing to light and introducing into the general sphere of philosophy. However vast the scope of the edition may be, its plan is still incomplete, for precisely because of its breadth, we have had to leave out certain independent schools. That is why we have persuaded our Shaykh friends to compile, for their part, an anthology of their great *Mashâyekh.* Since Shaykh Ahmad Ahsâ'î (1826), his successors—whom we may group under the name 'School of Kerman'—have been prolific, producing over a thousand titles. All this will finally allow us to appreciate the depth, originality and diversity of the aspects of philosophy and mystical theosophy that Shi'a Islam has enabled to emerge in Iran, or, if you prefer, with which Iran has enriched Shi'a Islam.

What may come as a surprise is that it is only now that people in the West are beginning to talk about all this. Undoubtedly, for some time now, thanks to the translations from Arabic carried out in the 12th century, specialists in medieval philosophy have taken an interest in these Islamic philosophers whom, following our scholastics, they persisted in describing as 'Arab philosophers', thus dangerously conflating 'Islamism' and 'Arabism'. On the other side of the Iranian world, the philosophers and mystics of India have long deserved not only scholarly research, but also the hope of wavering souls in

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[10] This article appeared in the *Cahier de l'Herne: H. Corbin,* but not in *L'Imam caché* – where only H. Corbin's texts were included, save for Christian Jambet's preface – and therefore does not appear here either. *(Translator's note)*

[11] The texts that Corbin eventually wrote for this project make up the book *La philosophie iranienne islamique aux XVII et XVIII siècles,* cit. *(Translator's note)*

search for the ‘Way’. And the Iranian world remained there, unexplored, between the Arab world and the Indian world. Monumental nonsense regarding the Shi’ite world continued – and continues – to be repeated.

It is by no means a coincidence that it was in Iran that lofty philosophical and mystical traditions found a natural home and refuge. Our *Anthology* presents the finest and most profound works produced by spiritual Islam. There is, for example, a Shi'ite concept of the First Emanation which establishes a link with Neoplatonism that both presupposes and opens up the perspectives of the 'prophetic philosophy' characteristic of Shi'ism. There is the emphasis on that intermediate and mediating world, the *mundus imaginalis (ʻâlam al-mithâl)*, to which I alluded earlier and of which I have spoken so much in my books that I need not do so here. Without the mediating function of that world, which ensures the articulation between the purely intelligible and the sensible world, we are deprived of the *hermeneutical key* that unlocks the real, true and concrete meaning—that is, the real 'place' of the visions of the prophets and mystics; the proof: our Western psychologies, incapable of viewing them as anything other than hallucinations, split personalities, and so on. That very *mundus imaginalis* is the 'place' of the real events that occur in the *Malakût*, in the world of the Angel which holds such an important place in Sohravardî and in his French interpreter. Without the *mundus imaginalis*, it is impossible to do justice to the reality of the events surrounding the parousia of the Twelfth Imam, the future resurrections and palingeneses. However, it is thanks to this mysterious figure, identified by many Shi'ite thinkers with the Johannine Paraclete, that the 'esoteric networks' of the gnosis, of the religions of the Book, are communicated.

I thus introduce the topic with which I would like to conclude this *postscript*, namely, the emergence of a project that signified for me the spiritual flowering of my entire scholarly work, whilst also being the fulfilment of a youthful dream. I previously evoked the path I followed through the interior of the Hagia Sophia as the interior of the Temple of the Grail. It remains for me to mention here the foundation, established with some friends and university colleagues, of a 'centre for comparative spiritual research' to which we have given, since we were all academics, the name 'University of St John of Jerusalem'. Its spirit: that of a spiritual chivalry best defined in the 14th century by Rulman Merswin when he donated the commandery of Isla Verde to the Knights of St John (those of the Grand Priory of Brandenburg of the Sovereign Order of St John of Jerusalem). For Rulman Merswin, as for the "Friends of God" of the time, spiritual chivalry implied a state that "is neither that of the clergy nor that of the laity", because, he believed, "the time of the cloisters is past". Likewise today, following the catastrophe brought about by the betrayal of the clergy, we must conceive of a state of the spiritual man that is neither that of the clergyman nor that of the layperson. As for the purpose of our foundation, it is none other than to finally establish, in the spiritual city of Jerusalem, a common home—one that has never before existed—for the study and spiritual fruition of the gnosis common to the three great Abrahamic religions, founded upon the sharing of the hidden treasure of their esoteric traditions, not upon the diplomatic accommodation of official relations.

To explain the emergence of this undertaking—about which I cannot say here all that would be necessary—one would have to refer to all the research, the ideas and the traditions that have ultimately converged in our concept of the University of St John of Jerusalem (legally and conceptually independent of any Order of the same name).

A moment ago I referred to the case of Sohravardî, who was not content merely to speculate on the possible remnants of Iran's Zoroastrian past, but resolutely embraced that past, thereby opening up the future. And this desire for resurrection fits perfectly with the views of Sohravardî and his followers, namely that philosophical inquiry which does not lead to personal spiritual realisation is a futile waste of time, and that the pursuit of a mystical experience, without prior serious philosophical training, is highly likely to be lost in aberrations, illusions and missteps. Ultimately, this is, in short, the form that the idea of what is designated in Persian as *javân mardî*, and in Arabic as *fotowwat*—terms that are best translated as 'spiritual chivalry'[12]—takes on in the philosopher's life. Everything this term connotes is the locus of the powerful convergences that have imposed themselves upon us.

To trace the path of these convergences would essentially be to show, beneath the esoteric horizons of the religions of the Book, the transition from the heroic epic to the mystical epic; the transition from military chivalry to mystical chivalry, or what Islamic spirituality calls the transition from the lesser *jihad*—the armed struggle in the external world—to *the* greater *jihad*, waging the spiritual struggle within the inner realm of each man, but also in a supernatural realm of cosmic dimensions.

We see how this transition takes place in Sohravardî and his followers, heirs to that Zoroastrian ethic of which it has rightly been said (Eugenio d'Ors) that it leads to the establishment of an order of chivalry. This was realised in Shi'ite Islam in the concept of the 'Friends of God' (Arabic *Awliyâ Allâh*, Persian *Dûstan-e Khodâ)*, and the idea of the companions of the Zoroastrian Saoshyant has been drawn into parallel with that of the companions of the Twelfth Imam of the Shi'ites. In short, this encompasses everything expressed by the terms *javânmardî* and *fotowwat*, as a way of life proposed to each person according to their station, for every station entails a 'chivalry' appropriate to it. We find this transition to mystical chivalry in the West in the 14th century, as I have just mentioned, when Rulman Merswin (d. 1382) entrusted his foundation of the Green Island to the Knights of St John, opening the way for them to a spirituality deeply linked to Johann Tauler. There we see the expression "Friends of God" (*Gottesfreunde)* reappear, and the idea of spiritual chivalry spreads throughout Rhenish mysticism. It is this very transition that takes place from the military order of the Knights Templar who took part in the Crusades to the Mystical Order of the Templar Knights of the Grail, in the *Parsifal* cycle of Wolfram von Eschenbach and the *New Titurel*. Finally, if the rebuilders of the Temple around Prince Zerubbabel were in fact the first Knights of the Temple, it is to a service of mystical chivalry that Isaac Luria's Kabbalistic cosmogony summons the "Sons of Light", just as they were also summoned by the Qumran community, to a spiritual struggle whose concept is clearly akin to the cosmogony and ethics of Zoroastrianism, quite apart from any affiliation or influence, demonstrable or otherwise.

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[12] See the French section of *Traités des compagnons-chevaliers*, **Bibliothèque Iranienne**, vol. 20, 1973.

Broadly speaking, that is the essence of our vision for the University of St John of Jerusalem (which I outlined at the end of Volume IV of my work *En Islam iranien).*

Of course, we do not expect the Order of this ‘spiritual knighthood’ to be recognised alongside the honorary and historical orders created over the centuries by the powers of this world. The very idea of such recognition would be ridiculous, for spiritual knighthood is a state oriented towards the beyond, whilst the purpose of the others ends with the speeches delivered at funerals. The Order of the Templars may have officially disappeared in the terrible tragedy orchestrated by its enemies. But the idea of the Order of the Temple, as the axis of an esoteric tradition predating even the historical order of that name and continuing after it, has never disappeared, because no power in the world can prevent a soul from bestowing upon itself the spiritual lineage of its choosing, and from legitimising this lineage through its fidelity to what it entails. As Unamuno wrote, it is important to recognise “that the past is no more, and that nothing truly exists except that which acts; and that one of those legends, as they are called, when it drives men to action, setting their hearts ablaze or comforting their lives, is a thousand times more real than the record of any act rotting away in the archives”.

That is why the only authentic reference is that which Christian theosophists such as Eckhartshausen, in the 18th century, designated by the expression I myself formulated earlier, the ‘Inner Church’, and which is but another name for this spirituality of the Temple common to the mystical theosophists of the three Abrahamic religions. This Inner Church is the only place where a spiritual chivalry oriented towards the mystical Temple can be found, the only one capable of responding in depth to the needs of our times, and which esotericism (the *ketmân*) must preserve from variations and adaptations to profane fashions. Only there, in the inner Church, can the unprecedented and paradoxical task imposed upon us in our times be considered: in some way, to find our God against God. What does this mean?

Centuries of theological, dogmatic and categorical certainties have conflated the Supreme Cause of the universes—the Supreme Principle, unknowable to humankind in its present condition—with a personal and anthropomorphised God. Secularised, these concepts have become totalitarian ideologies. More than ever, the Grand Inquisitor reigns as an absolute sovereign. The fact is that these theological concepts have been associated with the scientific concepts of their time, whether with the certainties of rational logic, or, when those certainties faltered, with the sciences known today as the humanities or social sciences. This is how exoteric monotheisms have prepared the great Void in which the cry has resounded: ‘God is dead’. But which God? Gnosis, whether that of Valentinus, Ibn ‘Arabî, or Isaac Luria, has always remained on guard against this confusion between the Supreme Cause and the personal God, for it has never transgressed the imperative of apophatic theology, nor has it lost sight of what theophanies essentially are and why they are necessary. To find our God against God is to find that God *for whom you are responsible;* it is to free *our* God from functions that are not his own, and whose attribution to his concept has allowed positive science—which cares not a whit for him—to officially declare his death. There is no liberation for us unless we liberate our God, our comrade-in-arms, from it. To find *our* God against the God of all systems, of all

dogmas and all sociologies, is to prove that, if *our* personal God brings us into existence *for him*, he cannot exist *without us.*

Our responsibility for our own life and death makes us, by that very fact, responsible for the life and death of *our* God. Whether He lives or dies determines our own life or death; here, of course, life and death are not understood in their biological sense, but in the Gnostic sense of the First Life, which comes from the world of Light.

How better to suggest the unprecedented commitment of the 'spiritual knight' in search of *his* God, companion of those companions who are on the same quest? In search of a God who is neither the Almighty nor the Great Avenger, but the eternally enamoured, tormented, anguished and disappointed One, whom the Jewish mystics perceived intimately in the person of Yahweh. The personal God is not the One of arithmetic unity. He is the Only One of every single one (1 x 1 x 1 ...). He is the All in the each. Every single one of whom he is the Only One frees him from solitude, making him *his* God. Such seems to be the profound meaning, the mystery of the 'God of Gods' (*Ilâh al-âliha),* to take up this expression of hermetic origin, commonly used by theosophers such as Sohravardî. And that is the secret to which all forms of gnosis have drawn near, especially, perhaps, that of Ibn 'Arabî and that of Ismailism.

The urgency of a task barely sketched out, yet never undertaken, is thus evident, since it implies the existence of a 'centre for comparative spiritual research'. That is precisely the subtitle by which we define the University of St John of Jerusalem. The urgent task is the comparative study of *ta'wîl,* that is, of the esoteric hermeneutics of the Book, professed and practised within the "religions of the Book". The convergence of the Image and the inner Idea in the esoteric hermeneutics of the Bible and the Qur'an often gives rise to encounters that might be described as electrifying. This is undoubtedly an immense task, requiring the combination of multiple disciplines, all the more so as we are speaking of a hermeneutics that is "professed and practised". It is not, therefore, a mere theoretical examination, but rather the lived consequences on both sides. That is why the University of St John of Jerusalem is not a mere 'Philosophical Society'. Nor is it, and even less so, a Faculty of Theology, which devises and delivers a programme in the service of dogmatics. Furthermore, to highlight the difference even more clearly, we follow each lecture with a few minutes of music, which leads the listener to an immediate internalisation, far more effectively than applause could ever do. I have just outlined the guiding principle, but each member of the fraternal group of the University of St John of Jerusalem retains their spiritual freedom in full. There are subtle differences amongst us all, as we come from diverse backgrounds and have followed different paths. The deep bond is a shared commitment and a shared responsibility, in reference to what we have previously termed the 'inner Church'.

Five volumes, totalling a thousand pages, have so far collected the proceedings of our annual sessions: *Sciences traditionnelles et sciences profanes ['Traditional Sciences and Secular Sciences'*] (1974), *Jérusalem, la Cité spirituelle* [*Jerusalem, the Spiritual City*] (1975), *La foi prophétique et le sacré* (1976), *Les pèlerins de l'Orient et les vagabonds de l'Occident* [*Pilgrims of the East and Wanderers of the West*] (1977), *Les yeux de chair et les yeux de feu, ou la Science et la Gnose* [*Eyes of Flesh and Eyes of Fire, or Science and Gnosis*] (1978)[13].

This latest session proved particularly fruitful. It helped to dispel many ambiguities surrounding the concept of gnosis, whether on the part of philosophers and historians who, out of prejudice or a lack of information, misrepresent gnosis, or on the part of so-called modern neo-Gnostic cosmogonies. Gnosis is neither an ideology nor a theoretical knowledge that stands in opposition to faith. A salvific knowledge in itself, its content is directed towards faith. It is wisdom and it is faith, *Pistis Sophia.* It is not limited to the Gnosticism of the early centuries: there is a Jewish gnosis, a Christian gnosis that has endured through the centuries, an Islamic gnosis, a Buddhist gnosis. And, above all, it does not in the least deserve the abusive use of the term 'nihilism'; rather, it is its antidote; for to reject this world whilst thinking of another world to which this is a passage is not nihilism. On the other hand, a philosophy that rejects both this world and the prospect of other worlds is, without a doubt, nihilism. But does gnosis have anything to do with it?

I believe that our project, made possible by the selfless dedication of a few friends, represents something rare in our country. The man who initiated it must now thank heaven for having granted him sufficient time for this project to come to fruition and take root, so that it may be included at the end of this *postscript.* I recently served as editor and translator of Rûzbehân Baqlî of Shîrâz, the incomparable mystical poet, in the Persian language, on the lofty path of human love. On this lofty path, I can affirm that, without the presence and cooperation of the company that shields me from loneliness and discouragement, none of the work described here would have been possible. And having been made possible, it in turn makes possible that which, having crossed the desert of youth, fulfils the desires of a seeker and teacher: to find oneself surrounded by young men, by young philosophers (some who are particularly dear to me are present in this volume[14]), and whom he knows will continue, in their own way, the work he will inevitably leave unfinished, and who will go further than he did along the path he set out to open. He who has thus been fulfilled will be able, when the summons comes, to say with Simeon: 'Now, Lord, according to your word, you let your servant depart in peace' (Lk 2:29). Waiting "while it is still day" (Jn 9:4), to remain by his side, on the battlement where destiny has placed him.

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[13] Although H. Corbin passed away before the sixth session was held, the University of Saint John of Jerusalem continued its activities regularly until 1987, the year in which it held its final session. His works are collected in fourteen volumes of the *Cahiers de l'Université Saint Jean de Jérusalem,* Berg International, Paris, 1975–1988. *(Translator's note)*

[14] Reference to the works contained in the *Cahier de l'Herne: Henry Corbin. (Translator's note)*

Paris, June 1978

IX

Theology by the Lake[1]

Everything is revelation; there can be nothing but re-velation. Now, revelation comes from the Spirit, and there is no knowledge of the Spirit.

Twilight will soon fall, but for now the clouds are still clear, the fir trees not yet dark, for the lake illuminates them with its transparency. And everything is green, a green richer than a piece for organ, on the highest keys. One must listen to it whilst sitting, very close to the Earth, with arms crossed and eyes closed, as if one were sleeping.

One must not walk about like a conqueror, pretending to name things, all things; it is they who will tell you who they are, if you listen submissively like a lover; for suddenly, for you, in the untroubled peace of this northern forest, the Earth has come to You, visible as an Angel who may, perhaps, be a woman, and in this apparition, in this solitude so green and so teeming with life, yes, the Angel too is clothed in green, that is to say, in twilight, in silence, in truth. Then there is within you all the sweetness that lies in surrendering to an embrace that overcomes you.

Earth, Angel, Woman, all in one, whom I adore and who is in the forest. The twilight over the lake, my Annunciation. The mountain: a line. Listen! Something is about to happen. The wait is immense, the air shivers beneath a barely visible drizzle, the houses with their red, rustic timber and thatched roofs, lying low to the ground, are there, on the other side of the lake.

Something will begin tonight, something promised, something I believe in. Ah! Tonight? When, then, tonight? If it were really in a few hours, it would never be, for one would have to finish and then start again, and it would always end without ever beginning. Do you know what it is to wait, and to know what it is to believe?

The Mystery of the Holy Supper into which you will be initiated, where all beings will be present—yes, you can only speak of it in the future tense. For when you *truly* read, as you do now, what is there, before you, when you listen to the Angel, and to the Earth, and to the Woman, at that moment you receive Everything, Everything, in your absolute poverty. But as soon as you have read and received, as soon as you look, as soon as you wish to understand, to possess, to name and retain, to explain and find, ah!, there is nothing but a figure and your sentence has been pronounced.

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1 This text was first published in *Cahier de l'Herne: Henry Corbin,* cit. *(Translator's note)*

For at every moment you are judged, and you must die. Then you die, when your existence decides and acts, for then it ends: what was is no more; you desired without renouncing, renounced without desiring.

No, you are the poor one, you are the man; and he is God, and you cannot know God, nor the Angel, nor the Earth, nor the Woman. You must be found, taken, apprehended; they must speak, otherwise you are alone, and perhaps that is all right, and it will *always* be so, always—that is to say, there will be no eternity for you. For you were born into a sin that was sin before you, and you were afraid, very afraid, and you cried out, cried out because the Earth was immense, cried out because the Woman was too beautiful, cried out because the Angel was invisible, and because you were Adam; and Adam wanted to live.

Adam established Love, lyricism, religion, for he wanted to live—that is to say, he wanted to be God—and then speak at will to the other beings. To ask; alas! and answer himself alone. To listen; alas! to give himself a concert.

But then, surely a procession of most beautiful beings will suddenly emerge from this lake. They will sing of Adam's funeral; and because Adam has died, they will declare in a chorus—to which more voices will join—that there was no anguish in all his moments: 'Christ is born! Christ is risen!'

Leksand in Dalarna, on the shores of Lake Siljan,
24 August 1932, 6 p.m.

X

Transcendental and existential[1]

The explanation that brings these two terms[2] together does not seek to compare purely and simply two technical vocabularies, nor two definitively closed philosophical systems, which would have been weighed up in order to pass historical judgement on them. The question in this particular case is whether Heidegger has truly 'understood' Kant or whether he has behaved towards him as a 'usurper'. In this specific instance, the relationship in question invites us first to consider what makes a relationship of understanding as such possible—the order not only of knowledge, but of 'historical understanding'. Now, to raise the question of "possibility", to seek the condition that *makes it possible (im Bewusstsein der reinen Vernunft)*, is to pose a *transcendental* problem. To pose it in relation to the primary fact of "understanding" is to evoke the task of *existential* analysis. The personal relationship implied, if you will, in the title of this paper, thus spontaneously refers us to that which, prior in origin, conditions its essence. What, then, is the structure of the fact of 'understanding' (*Verstehen*) that conceals within it the reality of a transcendence? How does this transcendence make itself known so as to be specifically designated as existential?

As we know, this is the approach put forward by 'Fundamental Ontology'. Before dwelling on this, let us note that whilst there has been much talk of ontology in recent years, it often seems to have been implicitly linked to a certain preference for 'realism', as if the aim were to put an end to the 'idealism' of earlier eras, held responsible for the disappointments of philosophy. This alternative, however, is by no means the subject of discussion; identifying it with a realist solution to a 'theory of knowledge' can only reinforce the usual mistrust of the very idea of ontology, since in fact it then designates nothing more strictly than the 'ontic' order of things.

To speak of the reality of the external world (even in a 'critical' sense) is not, however, to engage in ontology. To the same extent that ontological discourse is not strictly understood as a *transcendental* inquiry, one is inevitably drawn into this other confusion: reducing the purpose of *existential* analysis to the traditional debate on the relationship between essence and existence. It would then be a matter of defining the

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1 This text is H. Corbin's contribution to the 9th International Congress of Philosophy, "Congrès Descartes", Paris, 16 August 1937. It was first published in *Travaux du IXe Congrès de Philosophie,* Hermann, Paris, 1937. Throughout this article, the neologism *'existential'* is translated as *'existencial'* (see note 3 of Chapter VII). The standard term *'existentiel'* appears only once, in the final paragraph, and is left in French to distinguish it. *(Translator's note)*

2 The following propositions assume familiarity with Heidegger's general position in **Sein und Zeit**. They are drawn from a forthcoming joint work on the concepts of hermeneutics and anthropology.

the being of existence, the *esse existere*, and, more specifically within that framework, the being of human existence.

If the being of human existence were distinguished from all other existences solely by its predicate, the act of placing it at the centre would then mean not merely preparing a philosophical anthropology, but establishing an anthropological philosophy, and thus, perhaps, bringing about the ruin of philosophy as such. Now, it is by no means to a predicative operation of judgement that the thesis upon which *fundamental* ontology *bases itself* refers*:* namely, that the essence of human reality (*Dasein*)[3] consists in its ex-istence (*Existenz*)[4]. But because, by ex-sisting, human reality is henceforth always trans-cendent, the truth of this relationship is therefore more primordial than that which sustains the link between subject and predicate in the logical judgement. This relationship is a relationship of power-to-be, that is to say, a relationship with Being which is, from that point on, a certain understanding of Being. The first question we posed above amounts to asking ourselves in what sense this power-to-be, ex-sisting as *an understanding* of Being, forms the structure of transcendence. The second amounts to asking ourselves how that essentially ontological understanding, transcendental truth, is nothing other than the realisation by human reality itself of its real presence. And these two questions together respond to the same project: to unveil the being of human reality, the Subjectivity of the Subject, as reality-that-transcends.

The propositions that follow merely aim to briefly draw attention to the significance given to the problem of transcendence, in accordance with the concerns discussed at this Congress. From this clarification, it will become clear to us that, ultimately, the effective relationship between two philosophers and two philosophies cannot be sought or discussed outside of that which *gives rise* to and constitutes that relationship: the *repetition* of a question, a repetition that is not situated *within* History, but rather *effects* the Time of History.

I. The repetition of the question concerning the being of the Subject projects this issue onto the horizon of temporality as a transcendental horizon. What does this have to say, and what modification does it presuppose in the interpretation of 'transcendental philosophy' as we were accustomed to understanding it? There will be an opportunity here to take into account the whole body of recent research on Kant (Heimsoeth, Max Wundt, Gerhard Krüger); attention has been drawn to Kant's intention in working with Christian Wolf's philosophy in the background, not to destroy, but to 'save' metaphysics. The transformation of ontology (Kant still uses this term) into transcendental philosophy positions it as the "antechamber of metaphysics", but of a metaphysics whose purpose is fundamentally practical, one that "every man must possess", and which, under the conditions of the moral imperative, discovers a *practical* ontology of Creation. This purpose would ultimately culminate in an ethical-theology, in correlation with a

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[3] It should be borne in mind that this is an "early work" by H. Corbin. In the interview "From Heidegger to Sohravardî", *supra,* the author himself questions his initial translation of *Dasein* as "human reality" (*Translator's note).*

[4] For the French equivalents of Heidegger's terminology as used here, see our introduction: *What is Metaphysics?*

anthropology of moral life, that is to say, with an experience of life that overcomes and *transcends the given* by understanding it according to *moral* principles and *ends*.

If we raise the question of the constitutive being of the Subject, its transcendence then appears to us here in this teleological and ethical dimension: it is the *ought-to-be* that transcends natural reality, given reality. Is that, however, its absolutely original constitution? That ought-to-be signifies an overcoming of reality subject to time; yes, therefore, that 'ought' does not correspond to a future *given* in chronology, just as the anteriority proper to every transcendental condition does not amount to a chronological anteriority; what then is to be said, if not that chronology, chronological time, is not the foundation or reason for temporality itself? To discover the original structure of this temporality, is it not then to discover the specific modality of the Subject's being, by which the Subject, now as *power-to-be*, overcomes the being of given reality, of all that exists in Time, being itself the Subject of time? Thus, it is through an analysis of transcendental temporality that the analysis of the Subject's being is outlined; this analysis will reveal the original structure of transcendence in the power-to-be that exists as an understanding of Being, as engendering the problem of Being.

The transcendence of human reality as subject is thus announced in the power-to-be that constitutes it; it is essentially the pro-ject of the horizon (or the constitution of the transcendental object) that allows the existent to manifest itself as existent. For this reason, the relationship of human reality to its *existence* is not a predicative synthesis, but a veritative synthesis; in other words, an ontological synthesis or that which makes the very understanding of Being possible in the first place. Research oriented in this way finds its prototype in Kant's discussion of 'the supreme principle of all synthetic judgements', in the revelation of *the 'medium'* that makes possible and constitutes the *exitus (hinausgehen)* of the given concept towards something quite different. We shall not set out here the stages of the analysis as developed by Heidegger, and shall confine ourselves to recalling it very briefly[5]. By bringing to light the tri-unity of time, the "I think" and transcendental imagination, this analysis tends to discover in its original being the *res cogitans:* a discovery prepared by Descartes, then by Kant, but not yet developed, as it was always oriented towards the notion of *ens* (as *ens creatum)* or the traditional and popular notion of Time. Now, precisely in the Kantian sense, Time cannot constitute a kind of pre-given and neutral framework into which the imagination would introduce its activity in fits and starts, but rather, as pure intuition, it is at once intuition and configuration of the object. The horizon within which we experience time presents itself as a pure succession of *nunc,* but this succession is by no means Time in its original reality. On the contrary, it is transcendental imagination that gives rise to Time as a succession of *nunc*; it is this that constitutes the original Time (at once vision, foresight and retrospection of each *nunc).* Likewise, the *simultaneity* of the conditions of possibility of experience and of the possibility of the object expresses the structural unity of transcendence. Causing an *object* to objectify itself in the very act of turning *towards* it (ontological synthesis) is what constitutes, as such, the horizon of objectivity.

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[5] Cf. *Critique of Pure Reason* A 154–158 and B 193–197; Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics,* pp. 108 ff., 165 ff.

That is why transcendence (*hinausgehen)*—the prior and necessary transcendence for all finite knowledge—is a continuous *ek-stasis*, a 'hinausstehen' which we can translate here literally as ex-sistence; now, this *ek-stasis* projects precisely a horizon onto the *stasis*, and this answers our first question: existence that ex-sists as transcendence is in itself revelatory of a horizon and ek-static; ontological knowledge is the original formation of transcendence.

It is only once the temporality of Time has been unveiled in this way as pure *ek-stasis* that we can ask ourselves, no longer whether there is an I that is *the* Subject—that thinking I—but rather whether the 'Self', the ipseity, expresses the *being* of the Subject and how. The "persistent and permanent I", the "unchanging Time", as Kant puts it, must be understood in this way because the I, as the *being* of the Subject, is not *in* time, but *is* Time itself. The 'I' does not designate a soul-substance; its persistence is not an ontic attribution, but its transcendental structure, its self-objectification of the object, constituting a presence to the present existent. Constitutive of existence, ontological knowledge is not creative like the *intuitus originarius;* it does not create ontically, but refers only to the possibility of the existent, to the horizon that is not an object of empirical knowledge, but strictly a *non-sense*, a nothing. By its very transcendence, human reality is returned to its intimate finitude. Ontological 'knowledge' does not appropriate an existing entity, but *is* transcendental truth, a truth that gives rise to truth by keeping open the horizon that in advance allows an existing entity to manifest itself. In accordance with the fundamental meaning of the Greek term *alêtheia* (un-veiling), the truth of ontological knowledge as the transcendence of human reality means *alêtheuein*, to discover, to reveal the existent; the *logos* of ontology is not discourse *about,* but 'manifestation' (*apophaînesthai, phenomenology)*. As an existent, human reality is revealing reality (hermeneutics) and as such is fundamentally 'true'; by existing, human reality is never without a world, but rather *constitutes* the reality of a presence in the world, laying bare and verifying what is by persisting in this world. The answer to our second question is contained in that indication of existential truth. Transcendence is more primordial than any character of 'spontaneity'; it is founding freedom; it causes a world to reign by projecting that world beyond the existing, as its power-to-be, as the world in view of which it exists.

II. Heidegger has been particularly criticised for having, through his exegesis, abolished the fundamental Kantian opposition between Time and Freedom; by reducing all 'faculties of knowledge' to the 'transcendental imagination', this exegesis would be prevented from recognising any plane of relation other than that of temporal and finite existence; through this levelling, the significance of the radical dualism of Being and Duty, of experience and the Idea, would be annihilated. Is it truly believed, without paradox, that existential analytics tends to reduce human reality to natural reality? The criticism in question requires two clarifications: on the one hand, the precedence accorded to transcendental imagination is not directed at a 'faculty of knowledge'; it does not lead to making the understanding a 'sensible faculty' in relation to another that is not. The difficulty arises, it seems, only because one persists in making finitude a consequence of

sensibility; but is not the ‘totality in the synthesis of conditions’ constituted solely in transcendence, which is finitude?

On the other hand, and this is the most serious point, by grounding the contrast between 'time' and 'freedom' in a juxtaposition of 'faculties', it sets the temporal against the intemporal (or supratemporal) in such a way that temporality is reduced to the mode of 'chronology', that is, to the time that belongs to the existing thing laid bare *in* the world; but human reality cannot be reduced to that mode of being except in the absence of its *authentic* existence. As an existence that transcends and is therefore revelatory of the existent, it is human reality that *temporalises* the time of that existent. Its transcendence, which projects, reveals and grounds a world, constitutes the triple *ekstasis* of temporality. To designate this structure, we have elsewhere resorted to the old French word *historial;* etymologically, it is reserved for the specific mobility of existence, which is neither the becoming of Nature nor the continuity of a vital impulse. This historial structure is the *existential* condition of historicity, the possibility of a historical reality (*Geschichte)* existing that can be constituted as an object by a historical science *(Historie).*

The problem of the **Metaphysica generalis** is thus rooted in a more fundamental problem than that of Being, namely: for whom and by whom can there be such a thing as Being? Because of this problem, the finitude of human reality in man—that by which man is man—is revealed as more fundamental than man himself; it cannot be an 'anthropological' question; one must not begin by positing man as man. The *transcendental* problem of the foundation of metaphysics is thus rooted in *existentiality* as a constitutive possibility of the Subject. But if the *existential* is properly the possible that causes human reality to ex-sist, it will be important never to confuse that original project with the effective, *existential* power-to-be that it reveals in its initial outline. As an authentic revelation, this project has the mode of being of a resolved decision (*Entschlossenheit);* it is not directed towards a *thing situated* ahead, but is the anticipation which, by revealing the possible, *makes* each human reality respectively its own possible. As such, it *is* its future, and it is as future as it can be its past, assuming its commitment, transmitting it in a *repetition.* And this governs every relationship between two philosophers and two philosophies. What is it *to repeat* a problem? It is not to restore a past, but to assume and project that very thing which makes it *possible* as a problem. Human reality is its *past* as *a future* which it constitutes in *the present.* Its transcendence, as temporalising time through the future and the possible, is essentially overcoming, *the de-actualisation of the actual.*

The emergence into the light of the historical structure of human reality—'historicising' a world, because it can exist only historically—may lead to separating from all established historical science the existential project of this historicity, the understanding that human reality bears witness to there of its power-to-be. Fundamental ontology may separate the *horizon* of temporality from a 'History' conceived according to a model very different from what we today understand as historical science. How, for example, is the history of the Arab 'chroniclers' (Dhâhabî, Ibn al-Jawzî) essentially the exposition of a relationship between people? Why the meticulous attention to the 'chain of witnesses', to the interpersonal relationship for which and through which the events in question have 'existed'? On the other hand

-and the very notion of hermeneutics that underlies the phenomenology of reality-

—as one is spontaneously reminded—is it certain that the dilemma in which theologies are sometimes trapped: myth or history, is not an ‘ontic’ simplification?

But then, what is the ‘historical’ difference between ‘typification’ and ‘fact’? This borders on ‘theology’, and not by chance. It has not been necessary to proclaim the theological resonance of Heideggerian philosophy. However, the latter does not seek to replace or exclude theology as a positive science of the ontic and *existential* order*;* the intention and the limit of the word *‘existential’* are all too often overlooked on this point. But if this is what one wishes to discuss, one cannot help but be struck by the similarities between the prerogatives of human reality as ‘revealing reality’, and those which a theology—perhaps of the sort espoused by Meister Eckhart—recognised in pure divine subjectivity. Now, in this realm, a decisive question is raised by Heideggerian analytics. Traditional ontology contrasted the *ens creatum* with the *ens increatum*. But the problem of the *positive* relationship between the *ens increatum* and the Nothingness from which the *ens creatum* is created—the *Nothingness that is*—has never been made explicit. If, now, the being of subjectivity is recognised in the *ens creatum* as a being that is annihilated by nothingness, what will become of a Subjectivity that is *not Nothingness*?

XI

The Time of Eranos[1]

It is possible that in a century or two, give or take a few, some historian of ideas—if any still exist—or some student struggling to find a topic for their thesis, will discover in the *Eranos* phenomenon of the twentieth century the ideal subject for a monograph. This will perhaps resemble all those that, since the advent of historical criticism, have been devoted to the 'schools' and 'currents of thought' of the past in order to reveal their 'causes', explain their 'influences', the 'migration of motifs', and so on.

And so, it is to be feared that if he is content to apply a scientific method—which may possess every virtue except the fundamental one of defining its objective in accordance with how that very reality had defined it for itself—it is to be feared, he said, that our future historian will completely betray the *Eranos* phenomenon. He may believe he has 'explained' it through an ingenious and profound dialectic of causes. Instead, he will not have sensed that the real problem was not to discover *what* explains *Eranos*, but *what* Eranos *explains* by virtue of what *it implies:* for example, the idea of a true community, bringing together speakers and listeners, so paradoxical that it offers none of the characteristics in which statistics and sociology are interested.

That is why, if the possibility of our future historian is evoked here, it is by no means out of the vanity of anticipated glory, but rather out of the fear that the soul of *Eranos* might one day be lost in this venture. Had he not been gripped by that fear, the man who stepped forward to take on a solo role at the head of this volume[2] would have had qualms about standing out in this way from the chorus of his colleagues. But he is convinced of one thing. This entire volume is devoted to the question of time, which each of us has considered from the perspective of our usual reflections. Now, whilst it is true that in explaining things and beings in terms of their time, historians as such rarely begin by questioning the nature of historical time, perhaps the subject of this volume offers the best warning against the fallacy of a formula that seeks to explain *Eranos* 'in terms of its time'.

It would be worth reflecting on what these words might mean: *the time of Eranos.* For *Eranos* cannot be explained by saying that it is a phenomenon 'very much of its time'—that is, of everyone's time—according to the formula that brings such comfort to restless or hasty conformists. It does not seem at all that *Eranos* has ever been concerned with 'being of its time'. What it may, on the contrary, have achieved is *to be its* own *time,* its own era. And it is by being its own time that it has realised its own meaning, willingly accepting the impression of being

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1 Originally published in *Man and Time,* Pantheon Books, New York, 1957.

[2] This, we recall, is the volume *Man and Time.*

out of step. It is not certain things that give *Eranos* its meaning*;* rather, it is *Eranos* that gives meaning to those things.

How, then, should we conceive of it not as ‘being of its time’, as so many say, but as ‘being its time’, as each person articulates and realises its own meaning? Is it possible to suggest this in a brief recollection?

Why would our hypothetical future historian, setting out to explain *Eranos* through the circumstances, the ‘currents’ and the ‘influences’ of the era, betray its meaning and its essence, its ‘seminal reason’? For the very same reason that, for example, the first and final explanation of the various Gnostic families evoked in this book lies with those Gnostics themselves. Even if one were to assume all favourable circumstances and draw every possible deduction, one would never reason beyond abstractions were it not for the primary and singular *fact* of Gnostic consciousnesses. It is not the ‘great currents’ that give rise to them and bring them together; rather, it is they who bring about this or that current and make their encounter possible.

Moreover, it is likely that the word ‘fact’, as just used, does not here mean exactly what is commonly understood by this word in today’s language; rather, it would mean that which common language contrasts with it when distinguishing between persons and facts, men and events. For us, the first and last *fact*, the initial and supreme event, are precisely those people, without whom nothing that we call an ‘event’ would ever come to pass. It is therefore necessary to reverse the perspective of the common view, so that the hermeneutics of the human individual may replace the pseudo-dialectic of facts, currently accepted everywhere and by everyone as objective evidence. For, in fact, it has been necessary to begin by yielding to the ‘coercion of facts’ in order to imagine in them an autonomous causality that ‘explained’ them. Now, ‘to explain’ does not yet necessarily mean ‘to understand’. To understand is rather to “imply”. The initial fact of which we speak cannot be explained, for it is individual and singular, and the individual cannot be deduced or explained: *individuum est ineffabile.*

On the other hand, it is the individual that explains many things to us, namely, all those things that the individual *implies* and that would not have existed without it, had it not come into being. For it to explain this to us, we must understand it, and to understand is to perceive the *meaning* of the thing itself, that is, how its presence determines a certain constellation of things, which would have been completely different had that presence not existed first. This is entirely different from deducing the thing from presupposed causal relationships, that is, from referring it to something other than itself. And it is undoubtedly here that the contrast with our current habits of thought will naturally be perceived—those that represent all attempts at a philosophy of history or the socialisation of consciousness: anonymity, depersonalisation, the abdication of human will before the dialectical web that it has itself begun to weave, only to end up falling into its own trap.

What actually exists are wills and relationships of will: a will that falters, an imperious or imperialist will, a blind will, a serene and self-aware will. But these wills are not abstract energies. Or rather, they are not, and do not denote, anything

other than the volitional subjects themselves, those whose actual existence demands that the individual and the individual in itself be recognised as the first and only concrete reality.

I shall gladly admit to being in agreement here with one aspect of Stoic thought, for is it not precisely one of the characteristic symptoms of the history of philosophy in the West the fading of Stoic premises[3] in the face of the dialectic arising from Peripateticism?
Stoic thought is hermeneutic; it would have resisted all the dialectical constructs that weigh upon our most common conceptions—in history, in philosophy, in politics. It would not have yielded to the fiction of 'great currents', of the 'meaning of history', of 'collective wills', the nature of which no one can, in any case, describe with any precision.

Apart from the first and ultimate reality, which is the individual, there exist nothing but modes of being—either in relation to the individual itself or in relation to its surroundings—and this means *attributes* that have no substantial reality in themselves if separated from the individual or the individuals that are their agents. What we call 'events' are likewise attributes of the acting subjects; they are not being, but modes of being. As actions of a subject, they are expressed in a verb; however, a verb acquires meaning and reality only through the acting subject that conjugates it. Events, whether psychological or physical, acquire no existence, do not 'take shape', except through the reality that brings them about and from which they derive, and this reality consists of the individual acting subjects, who conjugate them 'in their own time', giving them their own time, which is always, by its very nature, the present.

Thus, separated from the real subject that brings them about, facts or events are nothing but *unreality*. This is the order that has had to be reversed in order to alienate the real subject, to bestow all reality upon the facts instead, to speak of the law, the lesson, the materiality of the facts—in short, to allow ourselves to be ensnared in the web of unrealities constructed by ourselves, the weight of which falls upon us in the form of History, as the only scientific 'objectivity' we can conceive, as the source of a causal indeterminism whose idea would never have occurred to a humanity that had retained the sense of the real subject. Separated from this, the facts 'pass'. There is the past, and the 'overcome' past. Hence the resentments against the yoke of the past, the progressive illusions and, conversely, the reactionary complexes.

However, *past* and *future* are also attributes expressed by verbs; they presuppose the subject who conjugates those verbs, a subject *for whom and by whom* the only existing tense is the *present*, and always the present. The dimensions of the past and the future are measured each time and are conditioned by the capacity of the subject who perceives them, by their moment. They are tailored to that person, for it depends on them—on the breadth of their intelligence and the generosity of their heart—to embrace the totality of life, *totius vitae cursum*, to totalise, to encompass within themselves the worlds by pushing the dimension of their present back to its very limit. This is *to understand*, and that is entirely distinct from constructing a dialectic of causes that have ceased to exist in the past. It is to 'interpret' the *signs*, no longer to explain material facts, but

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[3] See the excellent book by Victor Goldschmidt, *Le système stoïcien et l'idée du temps,* J. Vrin, Paris, 1953.

ways of being revealed by beings. Hermeneutics as the science of the individual stands in opposition to historical dialectics as the alienation of the person.

The past and the future thus become *signs*, because a sign is perceived precisely *in the present*. The past must be 'brought into the present' in order to be perceived as something that 'constitutes a sign' (if the wound, for example, is a sign, it is because it indicates not that someone *was wounded*, in some abstract time, but that they are wounded). The true overcoming of the past can be nothing other than its 'bringing into the present' as a sign. And I believe it can be said that the entire work of *Eranos* is, in this sense, a *bringing into the present.* Neither the content of this book, nor that of the other twenty-four volumes already published, has the character of a mere historical dictionary. All the topics covered take on the value of *signs.* And if it is true that, one day in the future, the *Eranos* project—an initiative that has persisted for twenty-five years—cannot be 'explained' simply on the basis of circumstances that might authorise the historian to say that 'it was very much of its time', it is because *Eranos* is a sign. It cannot and will not be understood unless it is interpreted as *a sign*, that is, as a presence that ceaselessly and repeatedly refers 'to the present'. It *is* its own time because it brings everything into the present, just as every acting subject *is* its own time, that is, a presence that brings everything relating to it into the present. An active presence does not 'fall into its time', that is to say, it is not 'of its time' in the sense of the simplistic formula that claims to explain a being by situating it in an abstract time that is the time of 'everyone', and therefore the time of no one.

In short, that is where the whole contrast lies. History is not made through *signs*, 'hierophanies' or theophanies. Or rather, the subject that is both the agent and the *locus* of history is the concrete psycho-spiritual individuality. The only 'historical causality' consists of the relationships of will between acting subjects. "Events" are each a *new creation:* there is discontinuity between them. Hence, perceiving their connections is not a matter of formulating laws or deducing causes, but of grasping a *meaning*, interpreting *signs*, and discerning an overall structure. Furthermore, it would be fitting for C.G. Jung's concept of synchronicity to be at the heart of this book, as it lies at the centre of a new understanding of time. To perceive a causality in "events" by separating them from people is undoubtedly to make possible a philosophy of history; it is to dogmatically affirm that rational sense of history upon which our contemporaries have built an entire mythology. But that is to reduce real time to abstract, essentially *quantitative*, physical time—the time of the objectivity of secular calendars from which the *signs* that gave a sacred quality to each present moment have vanished.

We are left to become more aware of the subject's abdication, alienating itself within objective history. It will first have been necessary for events to cease being perceived on the level of *signs* and to be brought down to the level of *data.* Signs have thus been secularised. But it will have been necessary for our entire theology to have prepared, through its own unconscious and fatal complicity, the very secularisation of which it is a victim. The meaning of History: the birth of a God in the flesh is no longer necessary to discover it. A class-based philosophy claims to possess and impose it, for it is, after all, nothing more than a secular theology of social Incarnation.

The caricature of our own image (Ivan Karamazov gazing at himself in the mirror) inspires all the more dread in us because we have nothing to set against it but our own features, which it reflects back to us in caricatured form.

Now, one does not compete with or against a scientific, materialist and atheistic socialisation, with a conformism of good people who find no justification for their existence other than in their social activity, nor any foundation for their knowledge other than in the 'social sciences'. The *'no'* that needs to be shouted stems from another imperative. It draws its energy from the lightning whose vertical line links Heaven with Earth, not from a horizontal line of force that is lost in a boundlessness from which no meaning arises. For what is called 'evolution' would make sense only on a cosmic scale; but our philosophies are too serious to entertain this curiosity, which is at most excusable in Gnostics and Easterners.

And yet, let us pause for a moment on the signature on these pages. Alongside a place name, there is a double date incorporating three calendars; a date from the Christian era, an Iranian date in which the official name of the month corresponds to the calendar of ancient pre-Islamic Persia, whilst the year is that of the solar Hijra (the rest of the Islamic world, outside Iran, counts in lunar years). It is a simple example. Can you imagine that the alignment of these eras, their 'present-tense' conjugation, could result from a simple mathematical equation with the aid of a conversion table? The answer would be *yes*, if one were naive enough to suppose that all humans everywhere are of the same age, have the same desires, the same aspirations, the same sense of responsibility, and that goodwill and good hygiene would suffice to bring them into agreement within the framework of abstract objective time, the uniform mathematical time of universal history.

But the answer will certainly be *no* if one has a keen sense of differences, a concern for the rights of pluralism against all forms of monism, whether well-intentioned or brutal and unacknowledged. What is at stake is a relationship between *qualitative times*. The Westerner may well be the elder brother or the younger brother of the Easterner, depending on the sphere in which they find themselves. But perhaps it is also true that only the Westerner is in a position to provide the antidote and to help the Easterner overcome the spiritual crisis that the impact of the West has caused and which has already ruined several traditional civilisations.

This simple example offers a glimpse of the true task of which we ourselves may not even have begun to be aware. It is a matter of perceiving the same *signs* together*;* it is a matter for each of us to interpret them anew in accordance with the meaning of our own being, but it is also a matter of constructing a harmonious hermeneutics, just as the fourfold and sevenfold meanings of the Holy Scriptures once harmonised. To this end, it is important not to retreat any further into an abstract time—the time of anonymous collectives—but to find concrete subjective time, the time of individuals. And this is, at heart, nothing other than opening up the living source of unconditional *sympathy*, pre-existing our deliberate and conscious purpose, the sympathy that brings humans together and is the only thing that makes them 'contemporaries'.

What we might call the *meaning* of *Eranos*, and which is also the whole secret of *Eranos*, is that it is our being in the present, the time we personally activate, our way of being. That is why we are perhaps not 'of our time', but we are something far more important: we are

our time. And that is why *Eranos* does not even have an official name, nor a collective corporate name.

It is neither an academy nor an institute, nor even something that can, in keeping with current fashion, be designated by initials. No, it is not truly a phenomenon ‘of our time’. And that is why it is capable of throwing the future dialectical and deductive historian off the scent. It will not even interest those with a penchant for statistics, nor those who conduct opinion polls.

If you’re after curves and graphs at any cost, I know of only one reference: the great planisphere by Daniel Brody, our spirited editor, who had the idea of displaying it on the walls of the exhibition marking the twentieth anniversary of *the Eranos-Jahrbuch* at the Rhein-Verlag premises in Zurich. A planisphere criss-crossed by multicoloured lines all converging on a single centre: an invisible point in the vastness of the map, Ascona, on the shores of Lake Maggiore. The layman might have immediately thought he saw something familiar there: the curves indicating the paths of aeroplanes, the lines of heavy air traffic. And yet, they indicated nothing of the sort, but simply the journey of each one of us, from different points across the world towards the centre that brings us together. Those lines have no statistical meaning: they were signs, the sign made *to* each one of us and *by* each one of us.

From the response to that sign arises the gathering of active, autonomous individuals, each of whom reveals and expresses, in total freedom, their original and personal way of thinking and being, free from all dogmatism and all academicism; a constellation of those wills, and a constellation of the worlds they bring with them, which they have taken upon themselves, bringing them into the present, the present of *Eranos.* A whole, a structure, not a result conditioned by the laws of the age or the whims of fashion, but a whole made strong by its unique inner and central form: a generous, energetic, tenacious feminine will, that of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, inviting a new creation each year, centred on a new theme.

And that is why all those who, in the usual sense of the expression, ‘are no longer with us’ are nonetheless ever-present in the present of *Eranos*. An immense amount of work has been accomplished. Essays and works have come into being that might not have emerged had *Eranos* not brought them into being. Its ultimate meaning is that of a symphony whose performance would be taken up again each time with ever broader and deeper resonances, those of a microcosm from which one cannot expect the world to resemble it, but from which one can expect its example to spread throughout the world.

Tehran, 21 December 1956 / 30 Azar 1335

XII

From Iran to Eranos[1]

Is it within the power of a human being to chart the course of their own life? Would they not have to be already on the 'other side' of the earthly horizon to be able to grasp it in its entirety? But then,
would only 'the others' have the privilege of being able to understand it, whilst they are still beneath that horizon, beyond which only an invisible point ensures the tracing of that curve? Or rather, does it all respond to the premonition that anticipates it? It is up to each person to experience the full meaning of their own existence as already lived, through a foreshadowing of all possibilities, in those privileged moments when everything is illuminated in a simultaneous transparency of terror and joy.

Moments in which a fleeting glimpse of the past casts the flash of lightning upon a horizon even more distant than all the futures a life—slowly consumed by time—could ever aspire to. The Eranos jubilee, for example... 'From Iran to Eranos': between these two names, the link is not a fortuitous assonance, but a complicity that invites us to savour the secret deference that paves the way for the stages marking the itinerary of a singular pilgrimage.

Beneath those two names, I read another, as if through a veil: Rudolf Otto, to whom I was directed, more than twenty years ago, by the master and friend, sadly now departed, that was Jean Baruzi. Of the conversations that the distinguished theologian—he who coined the term 'the numinous'—was willing to grant in Marburg to the young Orientalist I was then, I retain a twofold memory. In recalling them, he deciphers the meaning of an invitation and an omen.

Rudolf Otto, having reached the conclusion to which his research on the 'Son of Man' in the Books of Enoch and pre-conciliar Christology had led him, had the courage to formulate the brilliant insight: that the relationships between Enoch and the Celestial Man precisely foreshadow those that exist between Jesus and the *Anthrôpos*, and that they exemplify the same archetype, the one that illuminates, in Iranian theosophy, the figure of Fravarti, the feminine entity who is both the celestial archetype and the personal Angel of every being of light.

Another recollection: the reference to that young Japanese Buddhist, a disciple of the Pure Land, who found his way to Rudolf Otto following in the footsteps of Luther, the 'Buddha of the West', for the doctrine of redemption through grace and pure goodness had resonated within him like an echo of the compassion of Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, lord of the Pure Land.

Fravarti and the Pure Land: two themes rooted in the depths of the Iranian soul, since at the origins of the celestial Land of Infinite Light shines the sacred Light of Glory, the *xvarnah* of the hierophanies of ancient Iran.

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[1] Originally published in *Du 4,* Zurich, April 1955. *(Translator's note)*

Time has passed. I was unaware then that for ten years I would remain absorbed in research and meditation on this land of Iran, the 'sky-coloured' country, with the *leitmotif* so aptly articulated in my conversations with Rudolf Otto charting the course of my personal destiny. If it is true that one's destiny is measured for each person within the field of vision that has been opened to them, I should let the high mountains of Iran speak of how they preserve the latent presence of the theophanies bestowed upon Zoroaster, the vision of the Archangels of light that has dominated Iranian philosophy from Avicenna and Sohravardî through to their successors; the invisible trace of the footsteps of the Archangel Raphael, sent by the young Tobias to that Raghes whose landscape draws its chalk line in the subtle sky. As if, through the recurrence of its visions, from Zarathustra to Sohravardî, his resurrector, from Mani to the Gnostics of Shi'ite Islam, the soul of Iran had always been in the footsteps of her whom its ancient cosmogony calls *Fravarti* —and whom the Faithful of Love called Madonna Intelligenza or Sophia—that one whom the 'Parsifal' of the Acts of Thomas reaches at the edge of a celestial East typified by the 'mountain of the Lord', the mountain which, to the east, rises from the waters of a mystical lake. Iran allows us to give a name to this quest: *Fravarti*, the Angel, for there is no name that better reveals the wonder of light, without which there remains nothing but the Unknowable, the Unnamed; yet it reveals you to yourself as you were, loved and guided from the beginning of beginnings.

Was it necessary for these things to be articulated? But would they have been articulated unless there had been a pressing demand, and would one have yielded to this demand unless it allowed for complete freedom for the truth—freedom to say everything? Without *Eranos*, the endeavour would have been postponed; the moment when all this could be articulated would have passed. And here, then, is the second rendezvous with destiny, the other decisive turning point, since it was Rudolf Otto who proposed the name of what was to become *Eranos*. And it is 'at Eranos' that the pilgrim from Iran was to meet the man whose 'Answer to Job' helped him understand the answer he had carried within himself all the way from Iran. The path towards eternal Sophia. For this, thanks be to C.G. Jung.

Is an excuse needed to reveal such things? There is but one: to bear witness to what *Eranos* was for 'one of us', to bear witness to its horizon and its distances, sufficient for the foreseen journey to suggest its secret. But having said this, nothing remains but silence.

And it is in the inner silence that we must celebrate, in conclusion, the precious gift, the gift bestowed upon the heart. We have all come to Eranos from every corner of the world without having previously discussed amongst ourselves the subject proposed for our conversations. We have often achieved a unison, a 'homophony', which has moved us deeply on every occasion. Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, who was the channel through which the call inviting us to this unforeseeable encounter was addressed to each of us, put it very precisely: Eranos was possible only in a time of anguish such as ours. In a time when all authentic truth is threatened by the forces of the impersonal, when the individual abdicates his right and duty to dissent before the anonymous collective, when individuality itself has come to signify guilt, we shall at least have been the instrument of a world that

since ‘the descent of the Fravartis to earth’ has not succumbed to demonic forces, and we shall have contributed to the *traditio lampadis.*

For that imperishable world has been our passion, and this is the secret of what Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn so aptly called our *Ergriffenheit,* the source of that *juvenilitas* to which Schleiermacher alluded when he stated: ‘Religion detests solitude, and especially in its youth, which is the hour of love for all things, it is consumed by a devouring nostalgia’.

Tehran-Paris, January 1955

To Olga Fröbe Kapteyn

October 1951

On the horizon of a dervish
Pilgrimage across the high plains of Persia: boundless,
barren spaces, primordial earth,
Silent ochre, intensified by the glow of the dawn, In the fleeting
ecstasy of twilight.
Ridges that successively reveal their outline,
Softened by a translucent sky,
And towards which one walks amidst other, distant and
lofty walls
Solitude, silence, pilgrimage: the boundless.
Nothing but seasons:
Never will the thought reach the heart: 'This is the place of my
rest'.
The pilgrim, the *Sâlek*, answers the call of space: Beyond,
always elsewhere.
He is the Wanderer, the Renouncer.

Will he imagine, in a suspended pause
On one of those still, desolate *salt* lakes, frozen in the memory of
dreams
held by the *Soul* of the Earth,
Layers of *mercury* at the bottom of a rock basin, Impassive,
solemn, fascinating,
You will imagine surfaces of *Living Water* reflecting the brilliance
of flowers,
High peaks that enclose the space
In which to say: 'This shall be the place of my rest'?

For there, the Impossible, once, became real.
The Impossible: that, having come from other places, unaware
of their shared presence on Earth,
May the pilgrims have heeded the mysterious call and the
promise of a *Pentecost*.
They spoke aloud:
They spoke of their journey, their quest, a foolish hope.

And in their successive voices
Resounded the chord of a secret pre-existence,
Together they formed the *circle* of agape.

For a moment, they were the *Twelve.*

Then they were able to set out again, to resume the distances in
their shadow.
The invisible circle exists forever In the
world that foreshadowed it.

To *She* who, from the *Centre*, sends forth the call and brings
about the miracle,
Which caused the heavenly Gift to flow into souls
That for a moment were open to one another,
A continuous thought flows forth, which is at once Gratitude for
what was
And a confident vow for what, still,
Must be.

Paris-Tehran, September 1951

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